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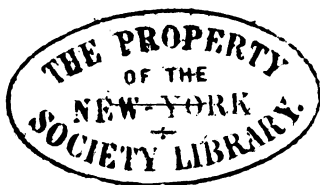
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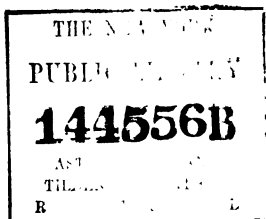
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## CONTENTS.

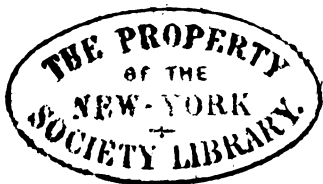


	PAGE
1. THE HON. STANBURY . . .	I
2. POOR MISS SKEET . . .	95
3. AN INDIGENT GENTLEWOMAN .	135



**THE HON. STANBURY**

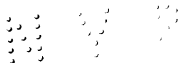




## THE HON. STANBURY

### I.

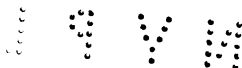
**T**HE Honourable Stanbury Marks stood in the porch of Lancaster Lodge, smoking a cigar. Lancaster Lodge was not, as its fine name might imply, his ancestral seat. That was far enough away, in the heart of an English shire, where his elder brother, Lord Warsop, now reigned, and where his mother lived—a pious lady who, in the intervals of lecturing the poor and subscribing to missions, prayed for the conversion of the Hon. Stanbury. Lancaster Lodge was only a shooting-box, one of a row of grim and hideous villas which destroyed the beauty of





a charming highland village on the shores of one of the most romantic of Scottish lakes. It had venetian blinds, and there was a great deal of cracked and blistering varnished wood-work about it, and it was chiefly furnished in green rep, and stained maroon table-covers. Its atmosphere reeked of the fumes of unctuous cookery, of the basting of rather high game and the haunting odours of more than rather high cheese. And mingling with these, there were always the stale and clammy scents of many tobaccos, which hung in the curtains, pursued you upstairs, prevailed in all the bedrooms, and triumphed in the lobbies. The click of billiard balls, the striking of matches, the tread of shooting-boots, the sound of men's voices—these reigned in Lancaster Lodge, which, you will now easily perceive, was a bachelor establishment presided over by the Honourable Stanbury Marks.

Stan Marks, as he was familiarly called, was now a man of about



thirty-six years of age, of a heavy build inclining to stoutness, of a broad countenance inclining to fat, and of a highly sporting exterior. The red upon his shaved cheeks and thick bull-neck had already a rather purple tinge, and though the grey of his eyes was still clear and good, their expression was heavy and dull. He looked good-natured, and, in spite of an exterior which was an ingenious and apparently intentional approximation to a gamekeeper's, he looked a gentleman. But it was a heavy and bovine countenance, and I cannot say it belied the inner man. I have hinted that the mother of the Honourable Stanbury Marks was in the habit of praying for his conversion. But he was not a bad fellow, not a vicious or even a dissipated man. If he had a ruling characteristic, I fear I am constrained to say it was greediness, and that if there was one thing he considered more important than good sport, it was good cooking. He certainly ate too much ; he certainly thought too much about

what he ate, and he only did not drink too much because, owing to the seasoned nature of his interior, that was almost impossible.

Even now, as he strolled down the short drive of Lancaster Lodge towards the road, with the smoke of his cigar curling out and upwards from under his thick dark moustache, he was thinking of his dinner, and wondering whether that last consignment of Pommery was really as good as the one which had preceded it. Round him, the still and golden beauty of an autumn evening was turning the place where he walked into the semblance of an earthly paradise. The lake was calm, the mountains round it were clothed in the russet of faded fern, the living gold of the birch, the dull flame-colour of turning oak and beech. Leaves, yellow and red, fell pattering to the ground in the still air, and all sorts of charming sounds broke upon the ear—the bark of a shepherd's dog over the water, the chatter of a blackbird bursting from

a bush, the cry of a heron, the bleating of far-off belated sheep upon the mountain side. But this man was quite unaware of it all ; practically, he neither saw nor heard. He simply walked stolidly along the high-road with a view, if there was really time before dinner, of going to the keeper's cottage to look at a dog.

The road followed the shores of the lake, at this point, with many turns and twists and infinite variety. As Stanbury reached a part of it where a huge rock projects which has to be circumvented, a very curious sound reached his ears which at first he was at a loss to account for. It was a hacking, intermittent, choking sound which broke upon the evening silence with a something indefinitely suggestive of disagreeableness and suffering. Somebody, beyond the turn of the road hidden by the rock, was having a terrible fit of coughing. That was certainly the sound, the sound of a cough, and as Stanbury turned the corner, he came quite suddenly upon the person who

coughed. It was a woman—a lady, rather—who was walking very slowly along the road, in the same direction as himself, and as she walked she coughed in the abandonment of a paroxysm which suggested that something serious was the matter. It was a terrible, one might almost have guessed, a mortal cough. It shook the slender black-clothed figure as a beast of prey might shake the victim in its clutches. It was not exactly loud, but it was breathless, bottomless, cruel. It hacked its way to the pity of the Honourable Stanbury through the fold upon fold of selfish indifference which encased that unpractised organ, his heart. He seemed to feel that vaguely, even now, as at a slightly quickened pace he passed the bent and shaken figure.

He went to the keeper's cottage and saw the dog, and gave his orders concerning the important animal. Then, lighting a fresh cigar, he returned along the same road. When he approached the projecting rock, which was hardly five minutes' walk

from the cottage, he saw that the lady was still there, and that she still coughed. She had come to a stand-still by the roadside, and was, with one outstretched arm, supporting herself against the rock, while with the other hand she pressed a handkerchief to her lips. Once more Stanbury passed her with an averted glance, but he had no sooner done so than his heart smote him, and something, a curious, reluctant something, made him slacken his pace. The lady was evidently ill. "It is the devil of a cough," he said to himself. "I suppose I must do something. She'll have a fit if it goes on!" Then he stepped awkwardly back and across the road, raised his cap, and said, "I'm afraid you're not well, madam?"

The lady had sunk down upon the bank beside the big rock, and with both hands pressed against her face, was evidently trying to choke herself quiet. When Stanbury spoke, she lifted her face and turned upon him eyes which were piteously suf-

fused and discoloured with the violence of the paroxysm.

"If—if you could get me a drink of water——" she panted.

Stanbury needed no second bidding. He scrambled down to the shore of the lake, filled the cup of his flask with water, and returned with it outstretched and dripping.

The lady was sitting up now, panting still, but no longer coughing. She took the cup with the ghost of a smile upon her trembling lips.

"That is much better!" she said, with a profound sigh of relief, as she sipped the water.

The Honourable Stanbury felt very bashful: the *rôle* of Good Samaritan was quite new to him. He moved awkwardly from one leg to another, and gazed intently, anywhere and everywhere but at the lady, with an imbecile expression of countenance.

"You have a very bad cough," he said at last, lamely.

"Oh—not really! At least, not now," she said quickly. "I

don't know what set me off, I'm sure. I haven't coughed for weeks. I must have breathed down something and choked. So stupid of me !”

Why the deuce did n't she get up and move away, and give him a decent opportunity to do the same? the Honourable Stanbury said to himself in an agony. She remained seated after she had given him back the cup, still breathing quickly and still pressing the handkerchief to her lips. She had, in truth, hardly collected her thoughts ; but presently she looked up and said—and her voice was very pleasant and sweet—

“I am sure I am very much obliged to you, sir. Pray don't let me keep you any longer.”

“Won't you get up?” suggested the Honourable Stanbury, bluntly.

“Thank you,” she said gently, “I'm afraid of standing yet—these fits of coughing make one so weak and dizzy. But please do not mind. I shall be all right presently.”



"I could n't leave you like this, you know—I could n't really," said Hon. Stanbury, uncomfortably, who was dying to go, but yet, as he said, could not. "Perhaps—I might inquire where you want to go?"

"I suppose I must get back to the village," she answered; "but I really could n't trouble you any more."

She rose and tried to walk, but was still so shaken that it was obviously impossible for her to walk alone.

"Perhaps," said Stanbury, nervously, "you 'd better take my arm."

After he had made the suggestion, he would have given worlds to withdraw it; but it was too late. The gentle voice said, "Thank you," and he felt the touch of a light hand on his arm. It was a terrible moment! If any of the fellows should chance to come out and see him! And thus this strangely assorted couple began to walk slowly towards the village, the lady protesting, always in the same gentle voice, against the trouble

she was giving, but leaning thankfully on the stout arm whose support she certainly required.

Now that she was walking by his side, Stanbury could glance furtively at his companion and begin to take in what manner of woman she was. She certainly did not belong to that part of the world, and the style of her dress was not such as country ladies affect. He had never seen her before, but it began to dawn upon him that he had seen many women like her—not here, not on country roads or in country places, but in town—very much in town, as he put it to himself. True, she was very quietly dressed in black, but black may be worn in different ways : it may be worn by the nun and by the female missionary, and it may also be worn—and very well worn—by the *mondaine*. It was after the fashion of the latter, and not of either of the former, that this lady wore her black—her long skirts and lacey tippet, and the wide hat with the ample veil negligently thrown

back. Under the hat, the hair was fashionably knotted up—hair of that harsh texture and crude auburn which owes its beauty to art and not to nature. The face which she turned to him so frankly when she spoke was of a faded prettiness, where traces of certain though very slight “make-up” struggled to repress the sad encroachments of little insidious lines and crows’-feet. She might really have been any age between five-and-twenty, and five-and-forty, and she was probably at this time about thirty-three. Her eyes were pretty—of an uncommon shade, a soft liquid hazel, and they looked at you very pleasantly, with glances half-confiding, half-deprecating. And there was no doubt about her voice—it was the softest voice that Stanbury had ever heard, the voice of a gently nurtured and gently natured woman. Mightily did the Hon. Stanbury wonder to himself who and what she was; and in a vague kind of way he thought himself a brute for the want of charity

of some of his surmises. She talked to him, as they walked along, very prettily, making the harmless and trivial little remarks natural to the occasion. It was a lovely evening, was it not? But how dark it was getting! And what a picturesque village Lochtullochend would be were it not for those ugly new houses.

"One of those ugly houses is my place—that one," said Stanbury, as the walls of Lancaster Lodge began to appear through the trees with a light twinkling at the dining-room windows.

"Is it?" said his companion. "Then you must not come any further, please. I am quite well now, and quite able to walk home by myself."

She had quietly withdrawn her hand from his arm, and they came to a standstill before the gate of the Lodge.

"Good-night," she said; "I'm sure I don't know how to thank you for your kind assistance. I don't know what would have happened to

me, if you had n't turned up when you did. Perhaps we may meet again. My name is Haynes—Mrs. Haynes—and I am at the hotel for a few days. Good-night, and thank you again.”

“Don't mention it,” mumbled the Hon. Stanbury, and very thankfully turned in at his own gate, waiting just a moment to watch the slim figure of the strange lady as she walked away.

That night his friends were very jolly, and in their companionship, and over a good dinner, he soon forgot his adventure of the evening. Minds such as that of the Hon. Stanbury are not impressionable ; good wines and the discussion of a favourite dish will rapidly expunge from their surface the traces of any new idea or active speculation. His friends gave him quite enough to think about, without his bothering his head about women he had never set eyes on before. *En passant*, I cannot say much for the friends of the Hon. Stanbury. Many of them,

indeed, were not at all nice. They all ate, drank, and smoked too much, and did many other things, also too much, which they had very much better have left alone. Circumstances—chief among them I am regretfully inclined to believe, the unremitting piety of his mamma and her satellites—had long since driven the Hon. Stanbury to consort with such men. They were the seven other devils with which he filled his house, swept and garnished as it was—empty, that is, of all natural and domestic ties. And they were, as the friends of a good-natured, easy-going man are often found to be—worse than himself.

2

## II.

THE postal arrangements of Lochtullochend were of a somewhat elementary character. You got your letters and the daily paper by waiting for them; and when they arrived in good time, you felt it was by a special dispensation of Providence, and were thankful accordingly. There was a way, however, by which the initiated could extract their correspondence prematurely—by being present when the coach arrived at nine o'clock in the morning, waylaying the mail-bag, and sifting its contents before they were consigned to the profound leisure of the local post-office. This was primitive, and it was also probably illegal, but it was the fashion after

which, for years past, the Hon. Stanbury had been in the habit of getting early possession of the sporting papers—the only form of literature, it need hardly be said, in which he ever indulged. The morning after his adventure, as he neared the inn, bent upon this usual errand, he began to think of Mrs. Haynes, and the next moment he perceived that she was before him, standing at the inn-door, sunning herself in the delicious morning sunshine and watching the loading and unloading of the coach. Stanbury thought at first that it was a nuisance meeting her, and having to shake hands and exchange remarks about the weather. But the moment he heard her voice he began to relent. Impossible to resist the overture of that gentle, friendly voice ! She only said it was a beautiful morning, and that he would have a lovely day for the moor, and, she hoped, good sport. But then, there is a way of saying such things which gives them a value quite out of proportion to the words.



This woman had that way—the charm of winning manners. Her cough? Oh, that was quite gone! She felt as strong as possible this morning. He must not think she was always coughing; that was only an accident. The Hon. Stanbury, upon whose slow and unreceptive mind the agony of that paroxysm of last night had made something which actually resembled an impression, thought to himself that she must be a very plucky woman to talk like that. He was just beginning to think that he really liked talking to her, when Mrs. Haynes said she must go in to breakfast, and he was obliged to take his leave. As he left the inn an ostler spoke to him, and told him that the horses he wished to see would be in the stables at three o'clock in the afternoon of the next day. The Hon. Stanbury said it was an off-day, and that he would come to see them. He actually wondered if he would see Mrs. Haynes again then, and speculated as to whether she was alone, or had any one with her—as

to whether there was a Mr. Haynes, and if not, whether he was dead, or a myth. And more than once during that glorious autumn day, as he tramped the moors, and sweated and swore (when he missed a shot), and swilled at his flask and munched his grouse-sandwiches after his usual manner, he thought of that woman away down there in the little inn—the woman who looked so delicate, and seemed so plucky, and had such a pretty manner.

Next day, arriving at the inn to inspect the horses according to appointment, he was crossing the lobby to summon the landlord to the consultation, when he was arrested by the sound of voices in dispute. They issued from the *bureau*: one was that of mine host himself, highly dogmatic and dictatorial in its tones; the other was a voice that the Hon. Stanbury already knew, a woman's voice, not roused or angry, but full of anxiety and entreaty. Stanbury could not help overhearing a part of the dialogue.

"I am sorry, mem," the voice of Mac Vitie, the landlord, was saying. "It is against my rules, and I cannot make an exception for anybody. We would never do business if we were to allow customers to go away without paying. I am not saying but what you would be sure to send the money, mem——"

"You would get it in very little more than twenty-four hours," the gentle voice that Stanbury knew broke in ; "if you only knew how very, very important it is for me to be in London by to-morrow morning——"

Here the Hon. Stanbury presented himself at the door of the office, which he was obliged to pass in any case. Mac Vitie was standing at his desk, backed up by his wife ; they were both looking severely at Mrs. Haynes, who, with a telegram in her hands and something very like tears in her eyes, was evidently arguing a point of great importance. Her face lit up with a smile when she saw Stanbury appear.

"This good Mr. Mac Vitie and I are having a little dispute, Mr. Marks," she said—she had learnt his name by this time. "I have got a telegram summoning me to London in a hurry. I simply *must* go to-night. But I find I have run short of money—that I have n't enough with me to discharge my bill and pay for my return both. I had written for remittances to-day, but of course that is no use now. I want Mr. Mac Vitie to wait payment till I get home; but he won't let me go without money down. Is n't it a shame?"

There was no rancour in her voice whatever, and her manner was arch, but it could be seen that acute anxiety underlay its archness. There was an awkward pause, and then Stanbury said, with clumsy severity—

"I think you should have trusted this lady, Mac Vitie."

That person's upper lip, which had formidable proportions by nature, merely lengthened itself in ominous silence.

"I am very happy to be your security, Mrs. Haynes," the Hon. Stanbury then said, with an awkward little bow. "Mac Vitie knows me."

The thin face, under its film of powder, flushed pink ; the soft eyes, still with a suspicious glitter as of tears in them, turned upon the Hon. Stanbury with an eloquence of gratitude in their expression which was beyond words.

"I should be in such a serious scrape if I did not accept your kind offer, that I won't even pretend to refuse it," she said. "I promise you faithfully you won't regret it. Mac Vitie shall have his money the day after to-morrow. *Now*, Mr. Mac Vitie,"—and she said this with an air of playful triumph that ought to have softened that worthy—" *Now* you won't refuse to let me have the carriage at six this evening, as I asked you before, will you? Then I can catch the mail at Loube. Ah, *mon dieu!* what a comfort it is to think that I can!"

Stanbury made as though he were going at once. But Mrs. Haynes stopped him.

“This is the second kindness you have done me, Mr. Marks,” she said, “and it is an even greater one than the first, if you only knew. Now you are going to do me a third—quite a little one this time : you are going to have a cup of tea with me. It is not too early, I think.”

Stanbury could not refuse, and, in a manner as yet inexplicable to himself—for he hated tea and hated the ladies’ society which usually accompanied it—he did not want to. He followed Mrs. Haynes upstairs, and tea was served to them in the public parlour at a window overlooking the lake. The inn was now empty, so that they had the room to themselves. Mrs. Haynes made a very charming hostess. She had the knack of putting a shy man at his ease, and not a symptom of coquetry. That would have frightened the Hon. Stanbury out of his wits. It would have recalled to his mind

certain terrible experiences of the past, the very thought of which made his blood run cold. For one cannot be the son—even the younger son—of a wealthy peer (defunct) without being considered something of a “catch” in the matrimonial line, and treated accordingly. But there was no business-like deadly significance in this woman’s pleasant ways. She made herself nice to him, firstly, because it was her nature to be nice, and secondly, because she was really grateful to him. Then, if she was no longer pretty, she was very sweet-looking ; the Hon. Stanbury already overlooked the fact that she evidently tampered with the colour of her hair and used pearl-powder. These things are never the unpardonable sin in a man’s eyes as they are in the eyes of the opposite sex. Her figure was really beautiful. A more fastidious eye than Stanbury’s would have noticed with delight its slight and supple elegance, and the unstudied grace and beauty of her gestures. She chatted away naturally and

pleasantly while they had tea, and did not seem to be at all incommoded by the clumsy silence of which the Hon. Stanbury was always painfully conscious in the presence of ladies. She began to talk about the severity she had experienced at the hands of Mac Vitie, the landlord.

"It's very odd," she said, "the instinct that these hotel people get about their customers: they always know the people they can trust, and the people they think they can't. Their hearts don't go out to people like poor me, I'm afraid——" she laughed, an odd little laugh, and shook her head, and glanced at her guest, and waited a moment as if she expected him to speak. The Hon. Stanbury's heart gave a sort of sullen thump; she was evidently going to speak about herself. Had he been at all acute in perception, he would have seen that she was nervously anxious to speak about herself—to force herself to a kind of confession.

"They know the people who look



like money, and the people who don't," she went on—"or no, it isn't that so much as that they know the difference between the people who will pay the money and the people who they think won't, if they can help it."

She paused again, and looked imploringly at Stanbury for some sort of assistance ; but he was dumb. Then she suddenly changed her tack :

"I was wondering," she said softly, "if I had ever seen you before? I see a great many people—a—a great many people see me—I am a professional—I—I dance——"

So that was it, was it? and the murder was out! If, however, she expected to see a change in the round, stolid countenance before her, she was quite mistaken. The Hon. Stanbury merely lent forward to put down his cup and said slowly :

"Did you always dance?"

"Would you really like to know?" she cried brightly. "Shall I tell

you? Would it amuse you? But I'm not the least famous, you know."

"I—I certainly don't seem to know the name," ventured the Hon. Stanbury, shyly.

"Which? Annie Haynes?" she laughed. "No, of course not! I have a *nom de théâtre*—but you wouldn't know that either."

Then she began to tell him her history quite naturally and simply, as if it were a sort of matter of course that she should do so. It would not have appeared to an on-looker that the Hon. Stanbury made a particularly sympathetic listener, but this woman seemed to find him so, for she prattled away to him as if she had known him all her life. His slow wits followed with difficulty all the subtle little turns and contradictions of her manner: it was partly playful, and yet partly serious—light, and yet with an undertone of gravity and sadness in it. His face, as he listened, was certainly very inexpressive, but there gradually

crept into his eyes a sort of stupid, dog-like look of admiration.

"I don't suppose I was *meant* to dance, you know," she began. "My father was an English clergyman—are n't you surprised?—and a gentleman, I suppose, but I'm afraid that that did n't prevent him from being a bit of a scamp." She shook her head and smiled sadly. "He did something with some money—somebody else's money, I mean—and had to give up his living and go abroad with his family. I was quite a little girl at the time, and my only sister an infant. We lived in the north of France and got on somehow. When I was about seventeen I had to think of doing something for myself, and some of our queer foreign acquaintances put the stage into my head. I was thought rather pretty in those days, you must know, and people said my figure and voice were good. But just then, something else happened—I married, in fact. The man was an old friend of my father's, and much older than I—but he was well

off, and we were n't, and he said he would do something for us all. And so I married him."

She paused, and looked grave and sad for a moment.

"I am afraid it was what the French call a 'marriage of convenience,'" she said—"perhaps it is n't very nice of me to talk about it so coolly. But he was n't a good man ; he didn't do anything that he promised, and he made me very unhappy. I never pretended to have much sentiment about it. It lasted a very short time. I was a widow at two-and-twenty. My father had died in the meantime, and my mother and sister had come to London in great straits. My sister was very delicate—my mother could never work for herself ; so I went back to them, and went on the stage to get some sort of a living. I could n't act a bit, and my voice was n't strong, but they soon found I could dance—I could always dance, even as a little thing. I did n't like the idea at first, but I soon got over that, and I've

danced ever since. It isn't a bad profession," she went on, after a little pause, "and not half as disreputable as many people suppose! Lots of us are quite dull and respectable, I can assure you! Well, I've been very lucky on the whole as a *danseuse*; I have hardly ever been without an engagement of some kind or other. Of course they have n't been very good engagements, and all at minor theatres. But now, just this autumn I've come in for a great piece of luck. I have got an engagement in burlesque and at the Folly! Isn't that grand? I am to dance in a skirt-dance, a sort of quartette with Effie Mills and Vi Montague and Lily Fane—of course you've seen *them* dozens of times, who hasn't? And I have actually a little dance all to myself—think of that! Why, you'll have to come and see me, Mr. Marks!"

"Of course I shall," said Stanbury.

"This very telegram is about my engagement," she went on; "they're beginning the last rehearsals a week

sooner than they meant to, so of course I was wanted in a hurry. I can assure you it would have been a very serious thing for me if I hadn't been able to get away, and present myself to the very minute, to-morrow night. Delville, the ballet-master, is not a man to be trifled with. If he just happened to be in a bad temper, it might have cost me my engagement. So you see how much reason I have to be grateful to you for getting me out of the clutches of Mr. Mac Vitie !”

“That's nothing,” said Stanbury, clumsily.

“Ah, but it is—very much, a great deal,” said his new acquaintance earnestly. “I can assure you I think a great deal of it. A person who has seen as much of the world as I have in the *rôle* of a lonely woman, Mr. Marks, knows how to appreciate a kindness, I can tell you !”

“But you—but you have friends ?” ventured the Hon. Stanbury, whose curiosity was still rampant.

“I have my mother,” said Mrs.

Haynes, gently. "My poor young sister died of consumption three years ago. It was very sad to see her die, she was so young and pretty ; but he could n't be very sorry, because she suffered so, and we could afford to do so little for her."

"So delicate yourself, too," said the Hon. Stanbury, quite sympathetically.

"Who? I? Delicate?" she said, in genuine surprise. "Why, I'm not a bit delicate! I never was ill in my life till last spring, when I had that awful influenza. Certainly it left me with a horrid cough, but that was quite cured. I had n't coughed for weeks till yesterday, and that was an accident, you know, a *choke* more than a cough. Of course the doctor says I must be careful. He advised a thorough change before I began the winter's work, and so I came to Scotland. But——" and here she broke off with a laugh—"what an interminable time I've kept you, talking about myself! I don't wonder you want to run away."

Stanbury had risen.

"I don't want to run away," he said awkwardly.

"Well, you've been kindness itself, Mr. Marks," said his new acquaintance, looking at him gratefully with her sweet brown eyes. "I shall remember your kindness and good-nature—long after I've forgotten lots of other things."

She had given Stanbury her hand in farewell, and he had enclosed it in an unconsciously friendly grip.

"I should like to come and see you in town," he said, quite warmly ; "I mean—where you live."

Mrs. Haynes' face grew very grave. She gently disengaged her hand from the man's grasp.

"I think not, Mr. Marks," she said quietly. "My mother and I live so very quietly—so poorly and shabbily, to tell the truth, that we think it better not to see too many acquaintances. It is a rule we have had to make—after experiences. It requires a deal of self-denial, but it is best so."



The Hon. Stanbury was too slow to push the matter further. Before he had framed a further plea, he found himself out of doors and walking home.

Dusk had fallen. The astonished ostler, still hanging about the premises, asked him why he had never come to see the horses. They were gone now—it was past six o'clock. He, Stanbury Marks, who hated the sight of women because they were a nuisance, interfering generally and in every way with sport and comfort—he, actually, had spent more than two hours in the company of a woman he hardly knew, listening to her talk about herself, positively interested in the account of her struggles, her aims in life, her hopes and fears ! What was he coming to ! Something little short of an absolute mental upheaval was going on within this man, as he walked back to his house in the yellow twilight of the autumn evening. What new sensations, what new revelations as to unsuspected possibilities of feelings

within himself, were these? No woman had ever spoken to him before as this woman had spoken. His mother and the staid young women she gathered round her had talked to him, but it was always in shocked superior tones as to a sinner—a brand to be plucked from the burning. And there were the other women who had pursued him in the matrimonial hunt with their deadly determination and awful wiles. But no one had ever treated him as this woman had done, looking in his face with kind, confiding glances, and telling him that he was “good-natured” and “kind,” and that she would long remember his kindness. No woman had ever confided in him before, taking for granted his sympathy and good faith, appealing to his manhood and the latent chivalry which was in him, as it is in all but the worst men. His slow brain was in a whirl; for the first time in his life he was thinking—thinking hard. She was only a dancer, a poor ballet-girl no longer young or pretty, whom

his mother would have called a daughter of the devil, and by other bad names ; but not all the sermons that his mother had ever heard, or wanted him to hear, could have roused in him that sense of shame and of his own shortcomings of which he now felt the first faint stirrings as he went over in his mind the points of Annie Haynes' history. Admiration for her courage, pity for her helplessness entered into the heart of the man as nothing had ever entered it before, and sent coursing through his sluggish pulses the tingle of an enthusiasm which was the nearest approach to a lively emotion that he had ever experienced. He went through the usual routine of that evening as a man dazed, as one who encounters for the first time in himself the phenomenon of an inner life, which has nothing to do with, and is sacred from, the outer. He was thankful his friends knew nothing of his acquaintance with Annie Haynes. He would not have named her name among them for a ransom.

### III.

THE month of November was more than half over. Lochtullochend was deserted, and Lancaster Lodge offered to the wild winds which lashed its windows an inhospitable front of crooked venetian blinds and badly fitting shutters. And from Lochtullochend, as from everywhere else, north, south, east, and west, along all the main arteries of travel, the busy tides of life had poured back again to the great toiling heart, the heart of at least half the civilised world—to London, which was filling once again for yet another winter and another season.

No part of London shows sooner, or in a more lively manner, the signs of resumed activity, than the district

which is so largely given up to theatres and things theatrical. The Strand on an evening of November, when "first nights" are on the *tapis*, is a sight to gladden the heart of the cockney. The stream of theatre-bound vehicles, the clash and roar of their traffic, the jostling of the crowds upon the pavement, the mud, the lights, the foggy air, the blazing fronts of all the principal theatrical houses, with their Rembrandt-like effects of tiers of flame flaring out into the murky blackness of the night—this is London in one of her intense and altogether peculiar phases. On such a night, with cold November rain just beginning to filter through the *souffron* of a seasonable fog, did the Hon. Stanbury Marks find himself in a hansom, bound for the Folly Theatre. Here he was to witness the first performance of "Fatma," the new burlesque, which was said to promise to the frequenters of that slightly notorious house a measure even more full and overflowing than usual of

the kind of entertainment always expected from that quarter.

Let it not be supposed that it was without a struggle that the Hon. Stanbury found himself in this situation on this particular occasion. Although not, as I have been at some pains to make clear, a man of a high type of intelligence, he was not altogether a fool, and he was aware that in going to the Folly to-night, and putting himself once more within the radius of the influence of a woman who had made as deep an impression upon him as Annie Haynes, he was exposing himself to positive danger. He had never heard of the woman since he parted from her on that October evening in the far-away Highland village, but he had thought of her perpetually. He had been bitten, severely bitten, and he knew it. Worldly Wisdom plucked at him now with her restraining fingers, counselling him to give the Folly a wide berth, and warning him that nothing but mischief would come of his going there

—but he went. Had he not promised to go and see her dance? A fellow must be a man of his word, by George! He had never promised to go there on the first night, but that was a detail which he overlooked.

When he entered the theatre and took his place in the stalls, the orchestra was playing the last cheerful bars of the overture. The comfortable little house had been re-decorated, and glittered with gilding and electric light, was luxurious with new plush and countless mirrors, and thick carpets which deadened every footfall. Stanbury looked round him, and saw the usual people—the solemn, bored, languid-looking men, the rather too striking-looking ladies—the one or two faces that he knew, and the tiers upon tiers of faces that he did not know. It could not of course be as typically *recherché* a collection of people as on a night of May or June, but some of the representative elements of the Folly audience were there, and Stanbury felt at home.

Not that he was a theatre-goer. To be a theatre-goer, with tastes however frivolous, some inkling of imagination is required, some *souffçon* of a taste for something abstract or spectacular — for pretty music, sprightly acting, pretty dresses, pretty faces—even pretty feet and ankles. The Hon. Stanbury cared for none of these things; he preferred his dinner to them all. The Folly was indeed almost the only theatre he ever entered. He would go there two or three times in a season with a party of men, after a dinner given by one or other of them at a club or restaurant. He had friends who knew intimately more than one of the fair ladies who “starred” it upon these very boards—goddesses whom they worshipped nightly from their places in the stalls, and to whom they sent floral offerings, and other even more solid tributes of admiration in the shape of diamond ornaments. But the Hon. Stanbury had never dabbled in these graceful follies; they interfered



with the processes of digestion, and were a nuisance after dinner when a man wanted to smoke. But now, he ruefully asked himself, was he going to change all this and become even as those others were?

The fateful moment approached. The gay drop-scene shrivelled to the ceiling and displayed the opening-scene of the usual Folly burlesque. It was supposed to represent the court of an Eastern monarch, and the Eastern monarch himself (supposed to be newly come of age) was represented by the usual young lady, not at all shy, who set off her liberal charms in a style of attire which would certainly have astonished any Eastern monarch—given, as these respectable potentates usually are, to more or less adequate draperies. There were the usual rival heroines, the usual buffoons, the usual songs, the usual topical allusions, the usual murderous puns, and the usual damsels of the *corps de ballet*—the comeliest, the most be-rouged, be-powdered, and be-jewelled, who, in

all wide London, impudently capered in the faces of an outraged county council, on the extreme verges of official licence. And there were all the usual hilarious inconsistencies of such a piece, so that no one could be surprised when the court of the Eastern monarch disappeared and was replaced, as if by magic, by an English pastoral scene ; here was to take place the dance which was said to be the hit of the evening—a dance of four (escaped) Puritan maidens, ogled from afar by the Eastern monarch (supposed to be present on his travels).

They entered demurely, the four slim figures of the dancers. The hot air fanned their crimped and flowing draperies with a light breath that set them floating ; the orchestra flung itself heart and soul into the gay, fantastic music of their dance : they began. Dazzled with the lights, bewildered with the sameness of costume and the matched height of the dancers, Stanbury could not tell at first which of them

was the woman for whom he watched and waited. Winding, turning, waving, bending—flying with winged feet across the stage—hither, thither, now in light and now in shade, wedding the very poetry of motion to the poetry of sound—the four dancers danced a figure which drew acclamations from the crowded house. Then first one and then the other danced alone, and the last of them was Annie Haynes. The Hon. Stanbury held his breath, and felt, for probably the first time in his life, the exciting sensation of acute suspense.

Rouge and powder and all the cunning accessories of stage make-up had lent again to the faded face that he knew something of its early beauty, and the little white puritan cap, sitting closely to the bright auburn hair, suited to perfection the sweet outlines of her profile. To the most perfect advantage could now be seen the supple beauty, the airy lightness, of her figure and her movements. Her little slippered feet seemed to

chase each other across the stage, which they barely seemed to touch, and all the diaphanous grey and white draperies of her dress now clung about her, and now floated round her, like trailing clouds about some creature of the air. It was certainly a very exquisite performance, that fleet and airy dance, and the house had rippled into applause long before the dancer, her figure ended, stood before the footlights, panting uncontrollably—but happy. The glare from the lights threw harsh and tell-tale shadows up into her face, and cruelly revealed the painfully pronounced articulations of the thin throat and labouring chest. A man, sitting next Stanbury, said something coarsely about “a bag of bones,” and Stanbury, with the old longing of Eton days, wanted to punch his head. But the poor dancer heard nothing but the loud applause, and stood there, smiling across the footlights—not with the affected, hollow grimaces of the *figurante*, but with the same smile,

sensitive, deprecating, grateful, with which she had smiled up into Stanbury's face when he handed her the cup of cold water on far-away Loch-tulloch side. That smile went to the man's heart, and pierced it with a stab of pity which left him with the ache of a longing he could not get rid of and could not understand.

Easy indeed is the descent to Avernus! The Hon. Stanbury could now no more keep himself away from the stalls of the Folly of an evening than he could go without food and drink. He went every night. But, as a sort of concession to worldly wisdom, which still kept whispering in his ear, he took no further steps. He simply sat in the same stall night after night, staring stolidly in front of him, too fearful of his fate to take more actual measures in bringing it upon him. But Fate, provoked with the timorous laggard she had to deal with, took the matter into her own hands one night, in the abrupt and decisive manner peculiar to her.

The Hon. Stanbury, from considerable practice, could now calculate exactly when Annie's dance came on, and timed his arrival and departure precisely by the beginning and end of that performance. He had picked up the music of the dance (it was the only music he ever learnt by ear, and he remembered it to his dying day) and its overture—the alternate scraping and wailing of the fiddles, the throbbing undertones of the harp, the rhythmic jingle of the triangles—never failed to bring him in from the *foyer* where he usually finished his cigar. He came in one night as usual just as the four dancers took their places. Annie seemed to be dancing more exquisitely than ever: she seemed like some delicate grey and white bird—to fly upon the wings of sound rather than to dance upon mere human feet. When the turn for her solo came, she whirled away to the crash of the drum with something almost more than the usual delicious inimitable precision and *élan*. It was

therefore the more startling to those who looked on, that in the middle of one of her most impetuous flights across the stage she should suddenly stagger and pause. Stanbury saw it with bated breath, and then, to his amazed and horrified eyes, it seemed as if a perfect torrent of blood gushed over her neck and dress, and as if she fell. But an actor who stood at the side caught her in his arms, and invisible hands from the "wings" pulled her out of sight. It was over in an instant: there was a half-suppressed exclamation through the house, and one or two ladies half rose from their seats; but, at imperative, invisible signs from behind the scenes, the rippling music never ceased, the piece proceeded, and the glittering Juggernaut of pleasure rolled on its way, apparently heedless of its victim.

The Hon. Stanbury sat on in his stall as if struck into stone—deaf to the music, blind to the lights—enduring all the horrors of a moment

which is consciously the turning-point of a life. That poor woman whom he pitied was there—somewhere in that building—in dire need, probably, of help and care. Should he go to her assistance, and thereby seal a probably most undesirable fate? or should he pass by on the other side, determined to know nothing more about her? There was prudence on one side: there was pity on the other—pity and the sense of chivalry. The struggle between them was sharp, but it was brief and decisive. The Hon. Stanbury left his stall, went straight to the desk of some of the theatrical officials, and requested permission to go behind the scenes and inquire for Miss Latour (the *nom de théâtre* of Annie Haynes). There were difficulties in the way. Gentlemen who took an interest in ladies of the *corps de ballet* were not unknown in those quarters, but there were naturally restrictions as to their admission on the professional premises during a performance. Stanbury represented



that he was a friend of Miss Latour's who had seen from among the audience that she was taken ill, and wished to know if he could be of any assistance. A message to this effect was sent up to the authorities, and he was presently admitted.

A boy led him, by strange and devious ways, through all the mysteries of "behind the scenes," to a scantily furnished apartment somewhere at the back of the stage, which might, or might not, have been the green-room—Stanbury was too ignorant of matters theatrical to know. Here, propped up uncomfortably on a couple of chairs, lay the poor dancer, just as she had been hurried off the stage—a crumpled mass of draperies and ribbons. Her face, under the caked rouge and moistened powder, was livid, the lips and nostrils smeared with blood, the hair loosened and disordered. She was not unconscious, but her eyes were closed, and she took no notice of anything or any one—sunk in a torpor of misery both of mind and body,

too deep for words. A hurried-looking doctor was standing over her, administering some restorative, and a person who looked like a charwoman stood beside him, holding a basin of water and a sponge. It was a sordid and miserable scene. From the stage close by came the sound of singing voices, the tramp of dancing feet, and the music of a particularly merry chorus—an ironical comment on the wretchedness of the spectacle, removed from all that glitter and hidden from the eyes which looked upon it with delight, but only a few feet of space and a sheet or two of flimsy canvas.

Stanbury approached the group shrinkingly and on tip-toe.

“Pardon me,” he whispered to the doctor; “I am a friend of this lady’s—saw her taken ill. Can I do anything? Is it very serious?”

In the face of appearances the question seemed almost idiotic. The doctor shrugged his shoulders. “It may be very serious, or it may not,” he said. “She has broken a small

blood-vessel—that 's all I can ascertain at present. I can't stay—I'm in a hurry. If you are a friend of the poor woman's, get her home as soon as you can. I'd go with her myself ; but I can't. I've an urgent case in Wellington Street. There, I must be off."

Stanbury followed him to the door. His round face was quite pale.

"Is—is she going to *die* ? " he said, in an awe-struck whisper.

"Die ? Lord ! no," said the doctor—"not just now at least. She *will*, you know, if she plays the fool. If she dances again, she'll dance herself into her grave. That 's her own look-out, of course. With decent care she might be none the worse. Get her home, sir, get her home. Good-night ! "

The sound of music and voices on the stage had ceased ; the second act was over, and the performers, a glittering, noisy procession, came trooping into the room. Elbowing his way through their midst came a harassed-looking individual, with a

billy-cock hat crammed well on the back of his head, who seemed a person in authority.

“How’s Miss Latour?” he called out. “Somebody said a friend had turned up to look after her—Oh, you, sir?” as Stanbury showed himself. “I beg your pardon, I’m sure. Dear me, poor Miss Latour!—most unlucky, I’m sure, for all parties.”

Most of the performers had rushed away to change dresses for the third act. Only the Eastern Prince and a few satellites—the lightness of whose attire was justly considered to make any change superfluous, since it would have been necessarily almost imperceptible—remained, preening themselves before the long mirrors with which the room was furnished.

“Is there no one with Mrs. Haynes—Miss Latour, I mean—to take charge of her and see her home?” said the Hon. Stanbury.

The Eastern Prince, who had stopped looking at herself in the glass, was now heard to remark that most people thought Miss Latour

quite old enough to take care of herself. Two or three of the girls giggled, but somebody cried, "Shame!" and a man in a mask, with a long flame-coloured nose, said "Shut up!"

Stanbury felt thoroughly unhappy and looked very helpless.

"I am a friend of this lady's," he said; "I don't know where she lives, but if somebody will tell me I'll see her home. It ought to be done at once."

The Eastern Prince laughed sardonically. She was arranging a spray of orchids—which must have cost some infatuated adorer several guineas—across her ample person, and she paused in this absorbing occupation to look up at Stanbury, out of her long, cruel-looking eyes, with an altogether detestable leer. He knew quite well that amongst these people he looked like a fool, and that they were laughing at him and at the situation in which he found himself. But the vanity which would have made him mind this, was

certainly not one of Stanbury's weaknesses.

"Won't—won't some of these—ladies," he said in desperation, "help Miss Latour to dress, or wrap herself up?"

The manager, who had been hurried off imperatively to attend to something on the stage, returned and began to bestir himself on Annie's behalf. One or two of the women brought cloaks and wraps and enveloped her in them. She seemed quite able to stand, but neither spoke nor gave the smallest indication of a consciousness of what was going on around her. Neither by word, look, or sign had she shown any recognition of Stanbury's presence. He supported her now, on one side, and the manager helped her on the other. Between them they got her into the waiting cab, Stanbury stepped in after her, and they started. As they crawled along, bound for some obscure street of lodgings in Soho, Stanbury felt that it was a very miserable and tragic situation, and his

heart sank within him. Flashes of lamplight showed him the pale face opposite him, with closed eyes and pained, contracted brows. Why would she not speak to him? One word, in that gentle and pleading voice, would have reassured him, and made him feel that his errand was not the most awful fool's errand that a man ever started on.

When the cab stopped, Stanbury and the cabman, between them, helped the poor-bundled figure out across the sloppy bit of pavement and up the steps of a darksome little house where no lights shone, and everything seemed dreary and deserted. A stout female, obviously in *déshabille*, for she would only open the door a very little way, received Stanbury's few words of explanation with great composure, and drew the sick woman indoors, with certainly none of the fuss which, though it might have been considered a nuisance, could not have been considered entirely out of place on such an occasion.

Stanbury had nothing left him to do but raise his hat and say that he would call to-morrow and inquire for the invalid. He shut himself up in the cab, and drove away with a curiously sinking heart.



## IV.

PEOPLE who afterwards followed the career of the Hon. Stanbury Marks never knew how very nearly, at this juncture, he ran a risk of never seeing Annie Haynes again : how very nearly he never went back to the miserable little street in Soho. The adventure of that night had been a rather sordid and miserable affair, and had left a disagreeable impression on his mind. That pallid spectre of a woman whom he had taken home in a cab had not been like Annie Haynes at all. Why had she never spoken to him ? Why had she given no sign that she was aware of his presence ? These things warred within the mind of the Hon. Stanbury and made him

very uncomfortable. What drove him back to her must have been either an overwhelming sense of pity and a kind of chivalrous feeling of responsibility, or else it must have been the overwhelming forces of his destiny.

In the voice of the lady who received him when he called, and who was certainly Mrs. Haynes' mother, he recognised that of the person who had talked with him at the door last night. She was a stout woman, of perfectly well-to-do appearance and a cold, lymphatic composure of manner, who seemed to have survived her reverses in the past, and to thrive upon her daughter's exertions in the present, with equal tranquillity. Stanbury, of course, inquired after her daughter, mentioned when and where he had had the pleasure of making her acquaintance, and supposed she was confined to her room.

"No, she is not in her room," said this lady—"she's in the upstairs parlour, writing and I don't know

what all. Of course she ought to be in bed, though I can't see myself that she seems at all the worse for last night. She frets so. It would be so much better," said this impartial person calmly, "if Annie did n't fret so much."

"If your daughter is really able to receive me, I should like to see her," said Stanbury. He hoped the lady would not offer to be present at the interview—and his hopes were realised, for she only accompanied him to the door of the front parlour and left him, observing that she must go and interview a tradesman downstairs. He knocked, and as he entered the room his heart gave a great bound of relief, for he immediately saw the real Annie Haynes again—not the dancer at the Folly, not the ghastly vision of last night, but the slim, gentle-looking woman in her black dress—the woman who had haunted his fancy so perpetually for the last two months. She came towards him with her own pretty, winning smile upon her face, and at

the first sound of her voice, Stanbury felt all the old charm come back again and lock itself around his heart.

"So it really *was* you," she said. "I thought I must have dreamt it, because I had seen your face in the theatre one or two nights ;—but it really was actually you who helped me last night ! Are you always going about being guardian angel, Mr. Marks ?" The voice was playful, but it trembled suspiciously.

"Happy to be of use, Mrs. Haynes," murmured the Hon. Stanbury, a victim to taciturnity when he would have liked to have said something "nice" and suitable. "I hope you are feeling better this morning ?"

"Better !" she said sadly. "What's the use of my being better ? Did you ever know any one so unfortunate as I am, Mr. Marks ?"

She had begun to walk up and down the room, clasping and unclasping her hands in an agitated, excited way. Stanbury had stationed himself with his back to the fireplace,

and followed her movements with anxious eyes.

"Look," she went on, "I've been writing to the manager, to ask him to keep my place open for me for a few weeks, and only to engage a substitute—But what's the use? They say I can never dance again. Did n't I hear the doctor say it last night? and the man who's been here this morning says the same thing—if I dance, I shall dance into my grave. Am I not a miserable, miserable woman? Oh me, and I've tried so hard!"

Her voice broke, and she began to cry, covering her face with her hands, the tears trickling through her thin, trembling fingers.

The effect of a woman's tears upon a man like Stanbury, unaccustomed to and therefore unsteelled against emotion of any kind, is intolerable. He felt the very heart within him melt, and a dimness rushed before his eyes.

"Don't cry," he said thickly.

"I might dance," the broken

voice went on, unheeding—"I might dance and die. I would, if it were only for myself; it's the best thing I could do—but there's my mother. What have I done? What harm have I ever done to anybody that I should be persecuted like this? It's the only bit of luck I ever had, this good engagement, and I danced so well—and now I must give it up!"

"You won't need to dance any more," said the Hon. Stanbury quite suddenly. His voice was hoarse, and came from a dry throat: it didn't sound to him like his own voice at all.

"What else can I do?" she said simply, thinking that he had merely stated an only too palpable fact.

"I know something you can do," he said, slowly and distinctly—"something that I want you to do."

No one knows—probably he never knew himself—whether what he was now about to say and to do was the result of premeditation, or merely of the overwhelming impulse of the moment. Before even his slow

brain, in that moment, there certainly reeled a confused vision of the portentous consequences of the act—its long train of consequences altering the whole tenor of his life. But he went doggedly on. "I want you to marry me," he said, with still laborious distinctness, "and not have to think about earning your living any more."

She lifted her tear-stained face to his with a look from which astonishment had driven away every atom of expression. Then she gave a little hysterical laugh.

"Are you—are you *quite* mad?" she said, when she had at last found a voice.

"Not mad at all," said the Hon. Stanbury. "I've been"—he hesitated for a moment—"thinking about it for a long time."

Then she came and stood quite close to him, and looked him in the face with wide reproachful eyes.

"Why do you do this?" she said, gravely and almost sternly. "Why do you come and tempt a wretched woman in the hour of her misery?"

"I am not tempting you to anything," blundered Stanbury, who thought that he was gravely misunderstood. "I'm asking you to marry me—I—"

"My God!" she exclaimed, "and isn't that a temptation?" Then she suddenly clapped her two hands against his chest, and tried, with hysterical vehemence, to push him to the door. "Go away," she stammered passionately, "go away—go away, Mr. Marks, and when you are gone be thankful I had the courage to let you go!"

"But I'm not going," said Stanbury, mildly. He took her two thin wrists into one hand, and gently forced her into a chair.

"Look here," he said, "do you regularly hate me?"

"Hate you?" she said, "God knows I don't! Why should I?"

"Well then," said Stanbury, with admirable directness, "why won't you marry me when I want you to? I'm not much to boast of, Lord



knows, but I'm not exactly a brute. I—I would be good to a woman, I think. And then I can offer you a good deal in some ways. I can faithfully promise to put your mother beyond the reach of want. I'll do more than the other man did, Annie!"

Her only answer was to break into a paroxysm of bitter, bitter crying. Too weak to repulse him any more, and yet overwhelmed with the consciousness that he ought, for his own sake, to be repulsed, she could only sob, helplessly, as if her heart were breaking. Stanbury became alarmed at the violence of her grief, and afraid of its results. He rang the bell, and Annie's mother answered the summons.

"I thought you'd perhaps better come," he said. He had put an arm round Annie's bent and shrinking figure. "This lady, your daughter, has promised—to marry me—ma'am."

He did not then so much as know her mother's name.

“But, you know, I never promised,” Annie said a day or two afterwards, when everything was practically settled, and they sat together in the same room, the dingy little room of the Soho lodgings.

“Didn’t you?” he said imperturbably.

“I have n’t promised yet. I ought never to promise—I ought never to do it, Stanbury,” she went on.

“No?” he said; “why not?”

“Ah, Stanbury! have n’t I told you a hundred times already?—because it means ruin when a man like you marries a woman like me; it means ruin to the man.”

“Oh, damn ruin!” said the Hon. Stanbury.

“But you must n’t d—n ruin,” she said, repeating the oath with a pretty little grimace.

“No, by Jove! I must n’t d—n anything in a lady’s presence,” said Stanbury—“I must remember that!”

"That's not what I meant," said Annie ; "I meant that you must not cut yourself off from all your relations by making an unsuitable marriage without thinking. Your people will never speak to you again when they hear you've married a *passée* ballet-girl out of the Folly."

"They never speak to me now, much," said the Hon. Stanbury.

"How is it you've quarrelled with all your relations when you're so—so good-natured, Stanbury?" she asked him presently.

"Never quarrelled with them," said Stanbury, flicking the end off the cigar which he was peacefully smoking, "but we don't hit it off, somehow. Fine old lady, my mother. I've gone down to see her sometimes—but there's too much praying and preaching, don't you know. A fellow can't stand it."

"Then there's your brother," said Annie, "don't you get on with him?"

"Oh, Warsop? Warsop's not half a bad chap! We were great chums when we were boys. Hardly ever

meet now : couldn't say why, I'm sure. Warsop wanted me to settle down near them once, and take to farming. Would have stocked a farm for me, I believe, and all that. Good man, Warsop ! Solemn fellow, though—Parliament man and all that kind of thing. Not my line."

"It seems a pity," said Annie, gently ; "and now most likely you'll never see or hear anything of them again."

She was staring into the fire, and spoke absently and rather sadly.

"Look here, Annie," said Stanbury, after a moment of what was, for him, deep thought, "I want you to shut up talking all this nonsense about your doing me harm by being married to me. If I was a boy, it might be different. I don't say it would n't. But I'm a man of forty, nearly,—independent in every way. I have a right to please myself, and I'm not answerable to anybody for anything that I do. So don't let's go over that old ground any more, Annie."

“Very well,” said Annie, gently, “we won’t. After all, it is affectation, on my part, talking about not marrying you, for I’m going to do it after all !”

Stanbury wrote to his family, announcing his matrimonial prospects, two letters which were characterised by all the directness and brevity which distinguished his rare efforts in prose composition. In return, he received from his mother some five or six sheets of closely written reproach, indignation, exhortation, warning, anathema, and pious quotation ; and from his brother, one page in which that respectable peer denounced the intended marriage in terms of brotherly indignation and sorrow, and characterised the bride-elect by certain epithets which a man of the world might be expected to apply to a lady who sprang from the ranks of the metropolitan ballet. But the Hon. Stanbury profited by the contents of neither of these well-intentioned letters. As he very sensibly remarked, “What’s the use of reading

a lot of advice that you don't mean to take?" And so he committed both epistles to the flames—unread.

And so they were married—prosily and rather godlessly, I'm afraid, before the registrar; and they went to Monte Carlo for the honeymoon. Probably nothing better could have been devised for Annie, in her weak and shattered state of health, than the delightful, dawdling life of the Riviera, under its palm and olive trees and by the radiant, Mediterranean shore. She seemed to absorb strength from the sunshine and from the soft air; and the amusement of the gaming-tables saved Stanbury from that stagnation which is apt to descend upon gentlemen of his calibre when surrounded by the mere beauties of nature. Therefore, their honeymoon was unequivocally a success—which all honeymoons are not, although they are popularly supposed to be by the polite majority. When they came home, the couple settled down in a little place in Berkshire, where Stanbury was in the

habit of keeping a horse or two, and hunting, in a leisurely, amateurish kind of way, two or three times a week. Warm rooms, good food, the best advice, freedom from care, and the chances of a mild winter, combined to do their best for the health of the Hon. Mrs. Marks, and it seemed quite likely that she might overcome the constitutional delicacy by which she was threatened, but which she habitually ignored. Stanbury made a good and even an unselfish husband. He himself had never been so happy in his life, although he was surrounded by fewer of those accessories which had always gone, in his opinion, to make life worth living, than he had ever been before. I do not say that the nature of the man was changed : that, for instance, he enjoyed a good dinner less, or thought a good dinner less important, than he had been wont to do. Often, on those long winter evenings of their opening married life, in their utter quiet so novel to them both, when they sat together,

he, half dozing in a big armchair, and she doing fancy-work by the peaceful lamplight—during the whole length of such evenings, I repeat, he would often utter no remark more sentimental than some criticism of the cutlets they had had at dinner, or some opinion as to the precise extent as to which the entrails of a woodcock should, or should not, be served up with that delectable bird in its cooked state. I say that I do not pretend to believe that the Hon. Stanbury was a changed man. But I do think it is reasonable to suppose, that when a man has a wife for whom he buys beautiful things—priceless seal-skin paletots, for instance, and sable boas (as Stanbury did for Annie, saying : “She must be warm, by Jove, and not catch cold”)—he has less to spend upon himself in costly wines and other favourite weaknesses. Whatever the elements of their mutual happiness were, they were certainly happy. They never spoke of love ; people who are getting on in life are somewhat shy of that soft



word which younger persons use with so much ease and frequency—but whether that is because they believe more in its counterpart or less, is a point upon which I am unprepared to give an opinion.

Probably the very height of Annie's happiness was reached during the autumn season which followed their marriage, and which they spent at Lochtullochend. Here she could play the hostess, and command a little social sphere of her own among her husband's friends. He asked down the usual set of men, and none of them were of a kind to refuse the invitation because their host had lately married an ex-ballet girl. Among these Annie found universal favour; they voted her a "nice woman," and admitted that she was as little of a nuisance in such a household as any woman could possibly be. She did not mind the smell of smoke; she never interfered in any plans, or in any of the time-honoured regulations of the shooting-lodge; only in the drawing-room did she

effect any change, banishing from its precincts the green rep and the maroon table-covers, and substituting many pretty things in their stead. She was not *exigeante* in the matter of full-evening dress at dinner, and was never shocked at the appearance of velvet or quilted smoking-jackets, however curious their cut or loud their hue. And yet, in spite of these and other little laxities, she lost no dignity, and the least edifying and most reckless among her husband's friends never treated her with anything but profound respect and great consideration, and this in spite also of the fact that her antecedents were well-known to them all. Her own amiability and gentleness made the idea of disrespect impossible and repellent, and then there was something about Stanbury—an indefinable something at the back of all his good-nature and easy-going indifference—which made men see that he was not to be trifled with where the comfort or dignity of his wife were concerned. Great harmony and mu-

tual satisfaction reigned within Lancaster Lodge in those days.

From without—that is from the houses of the surrounding neighborhood—a few country-ladies, hearing vaguely that the shooting-tenant had lately married, called upon his wife. Annie amused her husband afterwards with a description of their country clothes, their thick boots, and waterproofs and weather-defying hats—all of which astonished her vastly. She returned their calls in process of time, and sat in their various drawing-rooms during various more or less dismal quarters-of-an-hour, being somewhat frigidly entertained.

“They don’t take to me, Stan,” she said to her husband; “they don’t like my dear, beautiful, fly-away Paris hats, and they don’t like this”—and she touched her hair with a shake of her head and a smile.

“Why do you do it then?” said her husband, thus somewhat elliptically alluding to the frankly arti-

ficial hues of Annie's tresses—a matter of profound indifference to himself, for he had long since forgotten, or ignored, that there was anything non-natural about them.

“My dear Stanbury,” she said solemnly—“once dyed, always dyed, you know; one can’t stop doing that kind of thing in a hurry. I *might* stop it, you know, and I suppose it would grow right in time. But the transition stage would be so awful, Stan, I really couldn’t put your affection to such a test. Fancy a wife with pie-bald hair! Not even you could stand it! I never did it from vanity, goodness knows,” she went on—“only I had such a lot of hair, and it was n’t the right colour for the stage, and dying it saved having to wear a wig, which is such a nuisance and so hot. But you know, Stan, I’m using *much* less powder than I used to—look,” and she rubbed her cheek against his sleeve, to prove the truth of words which were only half-playful, after all.

Those were certainly very happy days, and as they wore on, and the autumn came apace with its yellow evenings and twilights reminiscent of last year, this not-too-young and rather world-worn pair of people began to learn to be a little sentimental. Stanbury would actually slink away alone and come down from the moor before the other guns, so that he might have a little walk with Annie before dinner. They would go away together along that sheltered, wooded road by the lake-side where they had first met, until they came to the very point where Stanbury had found his wife—the delicate-looking woman who coughed so terribly. There they would turn, and Annie's hand, slipped within her husband's arm, would rest there with a tighter pressure ; it was good indeed to have an arm to lean on ! They would slowly saunter home together—just as they had done on the memorable evening of their first encounter. And to this man of the world—to this stupid, heavy, and

commonplace man, and to this woman, worn with the struggle of the gaudy and hollow life before the footlights—the divine beauty of the evening, and all the hitherto unheeded loveliness of nature, began to speak in soft voices never heard before.

Annie, sitting alone during the long hours when the men were out on the moor, would often wonder if it were really true that she was so happy, and if Lochtullochend and all the circumstances of her life there were not, after all, merely a too exquisite dream.

## V.

**B**UT after all, unluckily, it was Lochtullochend, beguiling them with its autumnal beauties, that was their undoing. They lingered, after the departure of their guests, into the first week of November. In a sudden and severe burst of winter weather, Annie caught a cold which settled promptly on her lungs. It was a very bad cold indeed, and Stanbury heard once more, and alas ! constantly now, that breathless and indescribably disagreeable cough which he had first heard on so memorable an occasion. It necessitated prompt measures—a precipitate flight to London and a great lung-doctor.

“The South, Madam—the sunny South—we must certainly try the

South," said the great specialist blandly, who saw death in the face of the Hon. Mrs. Marks, and heard it in the crepitation of her lungs—but did not say so.

"Monte Carlo again!" said Annie, with her bright smile.

"Hum—no—I think not Monte Carlo this time," said the doctor. "Treacherous climate, the Riviera in winter. Egypt now—or Algiers—what do you say to Algiers?"

They both looked rather blank; it was such a long way off, such a *terra incognita*, and meant such a long absence.

"I think we'll say Algiers," pursued the doctor, with the decision of one whose word was law. "Nice place Algiers—nice climate, nice people, nice hotels——"

"Nice cemetery," was what he always added to himself, with a sort of rueful humour, when he gave this recommendation to patients like poor Annie Marks.

So they had to make up their minds to Algiers at a day's notice, almost.



"It's a dreadful nuisance, Stanbury—what a plague I am to you," said Annie, vexed and anxious on her husband's account. "It's a place you'll hate, I'm sure. And then there's Bracknel and the horses——"

Stanbury admitted, mildly, that it was rather a bore.

"I could go alone, Stan," she said wistfully.

"Could you?" he asked ironically.

"Or my mother could go with me, if that would make your mind easier." This was very reluctantly proposed. But Stanbury said he couldn't think of troubling his mother-in-law. It would certainly have been a pity to break in upon the serene settlement of that lady, in a little house in North Kensington, where Stanbury had installed her, to the satisfaction of all parties.

"No, Annie," he said, "we'll stick together, my dear. You'll be all right in a month or two—and we'll put in a bit at Bracknel after all, I

daresay. There are fellows who 'll go down and ride the horses, now and again—only too pleased. So don't you bother your head about that."

They went to Algiers, therefore, and settled themselves in pretty rooms in a certain fine hotel which overlooks the famous bay and plain that separate Algiers from the Atlas mountains. They accommodated themselves to the lazy, sunny, dawdling life of the place—the strolling among the terraces and gardens, the driving along the sun-baked roads and lanes. There was nothing in the world for Stanbury to do, but to fill and re-fill Annie's rooms with the roses and violets of an Algerian winter, and with all sorts of bewildering odds and ends bought from the Arab merchants and the native shops. In those days he became something of a nurse, for the maid they brought with them proved to be quite useless in that capacity, and so he came to have a curious familiarity with medicine-bottles and inhalers, and with the

uses of iodine and the administration of restoratives. People took an interest in the couple—in the gentle, amiable woman who looked as if she “had been an actress, or something”—and the heavy, uninteresting-looking man, who yet was such a devoted husband and an “Honourable” to boot. They were sorry, too, because the inevitable tragedy loomed so near—as, indeed, it seemed to all but the two people concerned. Stanbury thought Algiers was not half a bad place after all, it was so warm and sunny and flowery—only Annie did not improve fast enough for his taste. However, she was generally so cheerful herself, it was impossible to believe she could be getting worse.

One day, as Stanbury was coming up the hill towards the Algerian suburb where everybody lives, he met the doctor, who was also walking, and they tramped along together for a bit of the way. At a certain turn of the road they stopped to admire

the view, looking seaward where the sunshine dazzled upon the calm expanse of blue.

"Superb climate, is n't it?" said the doctor, who was naturally partial to all things Algerian.

"Good enough," said the Hon. Stanbury moodily, "only it does n't seem to do my wife much good."

Annie had been spitting blood that morning, and suffering under a fit of depression very unusual for her.

The doctor looked grave, and pursed up his lips. He looked about him for a minute. It was the hour of the mid-day siesta; they had the boulevard to themselves, and it was very quiet. It seemed to the doctor as good a time and place as any to make a painful disclosure—to state the necessary truth to a man who either could not, or would not, believe that his wife was dying.

"Our climate," he began, with a cough, "is justly famous for curative properties. It can do a great deal—everything, where—where other cir-

cumstances are in favour of the possibility of a cure. But it is not miracle-working ; it cannot build up afresh tissues which have—which have practically succumbed to the ravages of disease.”

These were mere words, a network in which the speaker himself felt entangled : of the dictionary meanings of most of them the Hon. Stanbury had probably but a vague idea—but a nail hammered into his brain could not have penetrated it with the awful directness of the doctor’s oracular sentences.

“What do you mean ?” he said hoarsely, to gain time.

The doctor looked to right and left, and wished that the interview could be avoided or postponed.

“Mrs. Marks is very ill,” he said gravely.

“Do you mean she’s dying ?” said Stanbury, almost brutally.

“I mean,” answered the doctor gently, “that if there’s any one at home—a mother, or a sister, or any one—that Mrs. Marks would like to

see, that person should be sent for without delay—without *any* delay.”

Stanbury did not wait to hear any more. He strode away up the hill by himself, and had almost reached the hotel before he realised that he could not face Annie with the effects of this awful intelligence fresh on him. Where could he go, out of this odious sunlight, into some quiet, dark place, hidden from all eyes, where he could learn to meet this blow as a man ought? There was a little church by the roadside, once a mosque but now adopted by the priests, and he turned mechanically into its open door. It was low-roofed, dark, and empty. A priest in tawdry vestments was mopping and mowing before the altar in a perfunctory sort of way, and a very inattentive acolyte was yawning in his immediate wake. Stanbury, no observer of such things as a rule, noticed them both with a curious distinctness of attention. There was a huge wooden cross with a life-sized figure

of the Christ upon it. He noticed that too. Something of its speechless agony entered into his own soul—a new pain bewildering, numbing, incomprehensible. Must Annie die? But when he came out again and saw the bright sunshine, all the teeming life of the reawakened boulevard, and the pink roses nodding at him from the garden walls, he was ready to believe it was nothing but a kind of nightmare, and that Annie was not, could not be, as ill as the doctor made out.

But she was very ill—sick unto death. Presently the rains came on, and a week or two of damp and squally weather successfully knocked the last nail into poor Annie's coffin.

The night came when she roused her husband, complained of breathlessness, and, with the dews of death standing visibly upon her forehead, gasped for air. Attacks of this kind she had been liable to of late, and Stanbury knew what restoratives to administer. He was as ignorant of

the signs of death as a child, but something made him anxious. He dressed himself and decided to sit up beside her till the morning. She seemed quiet, and without suffering; the dreaded fit of coughing was averted. She seemed to want to talk. Stanbury drew a chair to the bed's head, where he had propped her up with shawls and pillows, and sat down close to her. She slipped her hand into his and looked at him very earnestly. "I wish I could have seen your mother, Stan," she said, "just once—to tell her how good you've been to me."

"You'll see her yet," said Stanbury, gruffly.

"No," said Annie, quietly, "I'll never see her now. But, Stan—after I am dead, you must go back to her and try to make it up."

"She never acknowledged you," said Stanbury, bitterly.

"No, dear—how could she?" said the dying woman, gently. "One could never have expected it. I bear her no grudge for that."



She was silent for a few minutes ; a drowsiness was creeping over her, against which she battled. "What was it you said your brother wanted you to do, once?" she whispered dreamily.

Stanbury was puzzled for a moment.

"Wanted me to do, Annie—? Do you mean wanted me to take a farm?"

"Something like that," she said. "Well, you must go and do it, Stan. Stan," she added, rousing herself and speaking louder, "I don't want you to go back to the old life—among all those men who don't care for anything but eating and drinking and pleasure. I want you to be as you have always been to me—to be different from the others. You were made for something better."

"I was always the worst brute of the lot," said Stanbury.

"No," she said earnestly—"you have a good and noble heart. See what you've been to me! You took me out of the gutters of London

when I was sick and friendless, and you 'd nothing but my own word for my good name. And you 've made me as happy as a princess.—Stan, I want you to go back to your people—won't you promise? And when you go back, and they find out I sent you, they 'll find out I was n't a bad woman. For my sake, Stan?"

"I'd promise anything for your sake, Annie," said the man with a moan.

After that she did not speak again. Stanbury, thinking that she was going to sleep, stretched out his hand and put out the light behind him. Afterwards he thought he must have slept himself then, because when he came to consciousness again, the room was full of the grey, muffled twilight of the morning. He listened for the sound of Annie's laboured breathing, but there was none. The hand in his was very, very cold. The gentle heart, so near his own, had ceased to beat.

Then he knew what had happened,

and, not daring to look at the quiet face upon the pillow, he rose and blundered stiffly into the middle of the room. He groped his way to the window and threw it wide open, to be met by the phantasmal splendour of the tropic dawn. Far, far away, beyond the velvet outlines of the giant mountains, the glow of light, kindled at the forges of the coming day, grew and deepened, and the morning star, like a little silver lamp, flamed low in the eastern sky. The hopeless beauty, the aching loneliness of it all, struck the bereaved man as with a blow ; and he sank down and hid his face from the sun, which rose for him upon an empty world.

C.

**POOR MISS SKEET.**



## POOR MISS SKEET: A PROBLEM.

“IF you really want to know how we came to buy that plot in the Protestant cemetery at Rome, the story is easily told. It is a sad one, but rather absurd at the same time.”

“A thing can hardly be sad and absurd at the same time, Stephanus,” said my wife, who was present at the moment.

Louisa has been a good wife to me for thirty years and upwards, but she is not, and never was, an imaginative woman ; she could never see more than one side of an idea at a time. We were sitting in the library of the vicarage, entertaining an old college friend of mine who

had come to stay with us, and with whom it was a great pleasure to talk over the events of the past few years—years in the course of which we had not met.

“If you are going to rake up that old story about Miss Skeet,” continued my wife, “I am going away. It always puts me out of patience.”

I said, “Very well, my dear.” And Louisa gathered up her work and left the room. I continued my story to my old friend alone.

“You may remember,” I said, “That about ten years ago we went to Italy. My wife and I thought it would be nice to take the young people to Rome, and we all went there together for the Christmas holidays. It had always been the great ambition of my life to go to Rome ; but we had never been able to afford such an extensive tour. However, just at that time, you know, that extremely eccentric old cousin of mine had died and left us, quite unexpectedly, his very considerable fortune. Consequently we were enabled to do

the thing very comfortably, and as far as I was concerned, the journey and everything it brought was a source of incalculable pleasure and profit. It was at Rome that I became acquainted with the person you heard my wife mention just now—an elderly spinster lady of the name of Skeet.

The first time I saw Miss Skeet she was in difficulties. You have been in Rome, and you must remember the entrance to the galleries of sculpture in the Vatican—the entrance which is behind St. Peter's and so far from the rest of the Vatican buildings. There is no entrance fee, but sight-seers have always to present an order, obtained beforehand, to the officials at the gate, and these officials are very apt to make themselves disagreeable to strangers, particularly to ladies. One very wet day I had gone to the Vatican alone ; Louisa was not very fond of sight-seeing, and she had considered it too cold and damp to allow the girls to come either. As



to the boys, well, they *were* boys, and boys have not generally a taste for anything abstract as statuary. I think they had gone to see some small review or march-past of soldiers at the Coliseum or the Quirinal. It was a wretched day : the rain was falling in torrents and churning up the dust of the streets into seas of liquid-white mud. It was very cold too, and the damp seemed to penetrate one's bones in a way it never does at home.

“ I had just got into the entrance, and was shaking the wet from my coat, when I perceived one of the officials in the act of shutting the gate in the face of a lady who wanted to come in. I saw the poor woman trying to poke her order through the bars, and I could hear her voice raised entreatingly as she supplicated the obdurate official ; and indeed she was in a wretched plight, for a high wind was driving the rain in sheets about her, and what with struggling with her bag, her flapping waterproof, and her order, it was impossible for her to reopen her um-

brella. I had been long enough in Rome to know the tricks of these men who guard the public buildings, and I knew that if the poor lady would put her hand in her pocket and pull out half a franc, she would, order or no order, obtain the entire run of the Vatican on the spot, only excluding the private apartments of the Pope himself. But she was not apparently acquainted with this simple *open sesame*, and consequently I felt it my duty to go to the rescue. I had not sufficient command of Italian to argue with the man; but I approached him with the only argument he was likely to understand (the silver one) in my hand, and he instantly opened the gate. I had hoped that the mercenary nature of my interference would be unobserved by the lady, but by some unfortunate awkwardness on my part it was not, for as soon as she was under shelter she muttered something to me about indebtedness, and began groping in her pocket for her purse.

“She was a tall, gaunt woman, of

a forlorn-looking type that I'm afraid is common in our society at the present date. She was very shabbily and unfashionably dressed, and had the nervous, fluttered manner of a person who has no self-confidence. The water seemed to be dripping from every angle of her figure, and the wind had blown some thin strands of her hair across her forehead. I don't know why, but I felt very sorry for the woman.

"She was a long time looking for her purse, and after she found it, an equally long time hunting for the coin she owed me. It was a very large purse, but it seemed to have everything in it but money—a button-hook, for instance, and scraps of paper with memoranda scribbled upon them, and dried flowers and an almanack. At last she found the half-lira, and I was of course obliged to take it, as any refusal would have been in questionable taste. She muttered some incoherent thanks, and then I took off my hat, bowed, and left her.

“However, I saw her again very shortly. In galleries like those of the Vatican you are always meeting the same people. When I entered the cabinet which contains the Apollo Belvedere, there she was, standing in front of that famous work of art, entirely absorbed in the contemplation of it. I had time to look both at her and it, and to reflect philosophically upon the history of the Race as epitomised, as it were, in the contrast between the cut of this poor lady’s circular waterproof cloak and the superb piece of drapery which hangs over the left arm of the Apollo. It was really a suggestive contrast, and the group formed by this solitary, draggled-looking woman and the marble god, so magnificent in his beauty, so haughty in his attitude, was one I have somehow never been able to forget. To my idle fancy, it seemed that the ‘Lord of the unerring Bow’ had just transfixed her with his cruel arrow, and now stood lost in proud surprise at the insignificance of his prey.

“ Her eyes were so glued to the object of her admiration that she did not see me, and in moving reluctantly away she knocked up against me, and was instantly full of apologies. I felt suddenly impelled to talk to her.

“ ‘ This is a very splendid work of art, is it not, madam ? ’ I said politely.

“ She looked at me wistfully, and then said, in a trembling voice—

“ ‘ It is a revelation of beauty ! ’

“ I had not expected this kind of a remark from her, and I could see it was made under the impulse of positive emotion. Her lips trembled, and her face, where it was not blue with cold, was flushed with excitement. Her reddened bony hands trembled as they turned over the leaves of her guide-book.

“ ‘ These hand-books,’ I remarked, ‘ are very unsatisfactory in the information they give—especially about the sculptures.’

“ ‘ Oh ! very,’ she responded eagerly. ‘ They say so little and I want to know so much.’

“We passed together into the cabinet of the Laocoön, and thence into the other cabinets of the Belvedere, and I found myself acting as cicerone to this forlorn female—who, however, drank in all the information I could give her, with the avidity of some youthful enthusiast. I told her the legend of the Laocoön ; I pointed out the radical inferiority of the works of Canova to those of the antique artists ; I sympathised with her admiration of the Hermes, and finally I wandered with her through the entire portion of the gallery which is on that storey of the building. We even penetrated into the cabinet of the Venus, and I was relieved to find that her interest and curiosity waned when a goddess was in question—for the legends concerning the females of mythology do not always lend themselves to polite narration. But her feelings of delight and rapture seemed to reach their greatest intensity when we stood before the colossal bust of the Antinous in the Sala Rotonda. I cannot de-

scribe the almost morbid fascination which this—the type of all that is most rich, most intense, most profoundly sensuous in Paganism—at once seemed to acquire over the imagination of this meagre spinster who stood there, the living representative of all that is most repressed, and, by force of circumstances, most ascetic, in our modern system of society. I told her all I could about the famous myth of the Antinous, favourite of the great emperor—the creature half-god, half-man, whose fate is shrouded in a mystery so deep that none can tell whether it was a mystery of the highest glory or a secret of the deepest shame. She was absorbed—lost—in my narrative, and when it was concluded, drew a deep sigh and murmured, ‘How strange ! How beautiful !’

“ I could, in fact, hardly draw her away from that Antinous in whom she seemed to have found her fate. I had myself by this time had about as much of the Vatican as I could stand on such a morning. I have no

doubt you can recall the cold of those galleries ; it is something to remember when everything else is forgotten. Those marble deities, with their immortal indifference to human suffering, seem actually to radiate cold.

“ ‘ I ’m afraid,’ I said at last to my companion, ‘ that I must be hurrying back to lunch. Are you not thinking of going back now, too ? ’

“ ‘ Going back ? oh, no ! ’ said she. ‘ I shall stay here till the gallery closes.’

“ ‘ Don’t you know,’ I hinted, ‘ that it is considered very unadvisable to go fasting too long in Rome ? A great deal of strength must be kept up to resist the malarious influences of the climate. Besides, are n’t you very cold ? ’

“ ‘ Is it cold ? ’ she questioned vaguely. She was, I believe, as chilled, as numbed in every joint as I was myself, but in her enthusiasm she was indifferent to physical suffering.

“ I said good-bye, and shook hands



with her. By this time I had learnt in the course of our conversation that her name was Skeet ; that she was paying a visit to Rome projected and looked forward to for half a lifetime ; and that she was staying in a *pension* somewhere in the dingy neighbourhood of the Pantheon.

“ I remarked that I hoped we should meet again in the course of our sight-seeing, and I even asked if, some day, we might not call for her in her hotel on our way to some point of interest and induce her to join us. Acquaintances ripen fast under the genial climate of a foreign country, and there was something almost painfully attractive to me in this lonely woman’s passionate appreciation of the things she saw. I then left her, and as I walked away I could hear the ‘swish’ of her draggled mackintosh against the marble floor, as she walked back to dream her barren dreams over the Antinous.

“ When I got home, I of course told my wife about Miss Skeet, and

about my intention of befriending her a little in the matter of sight-seeing.

“‘I daresay,’ said Louisa, ‘she’s some extraordinary old scarecrow. You do pick up the queerest acquaintances, Stephanus—the very people that everybody else would want to avoid.’

“‘My dear,’ I replied mildly, ‘she is a most inoffensive woman. She is very poor, I am afraid, and I am quite sure she is lonely. It will be a kindness to help her a little. Besides, she is really a person of intelligence and appreciation.’

“Louisa looked a little impatient.

“‘I do believe, Stephanus,’ she said, ‘that if I had n’t met you when you were young and still had a natural, reasonable liking for cheerfulness and good looks, you’d have had a harem round you by this time of all the ugliest, forlornest old maids in Christendom!’

“‘My dear Louisa,’ I retorted, ‘Mr. Blank, whose works on Rome you justly appreciate so highly, sup-

ports, out of his literary earnings, an entire institution for maiden ladies.'

"'Just like a Dogs' Home,' said Louisa, and that closed the conversation.

"I can't say that our many following expeditions with Miss Skeet were an entire success ; I mean that I am afraid our taking her up *en famille* did not quite answer. I suggested one day, for instance, that Louisa and the girls and myself should take her with us again to the Vatican, but this time on a fine, genial, sunny day. We did take her, but I was sorry for it afterwards, though I blame no one. My girls were young things at that time ; handsome creatures they both were, though perhaps I should not say so. Alice had just become engaged to the fellow she married in the course of the summer, and Ethel at that time was much taken up with the attentions of an admirer of hers in our hotel. They had a great deal of the insolence of their youth and happiness, I am afraid—a sort of

insolence that we old folk learn to have more and more tolerance for, because we know it can't last very long—and they did n't pay much attention to Miss Skeet. Indeed, at that time—bless them—they had n't much attention to give to anything but themselves and their own concerns, and even the priceless treasures of the Vatican came in for a very small share of their consideration. They were always very well and strikingly dressed, and I am afraid they were a good deal more taken up by the admiring glances cast after them by almost every young man they met in the gallery, than by the beauty of the Apollo Belvedere or the terror of the Laocoön.

“‘I am afraid,’ I said apologetically to Miss Skeet, ‘that you must think our young people very frivolous.’

“I expected her to be slightly indignant at the rather cross indifference of my two dashing young ladies—indifference towards those objects of beauty and antiquity

which caused such a flutter of excitement in her own bosom. But she only looked at me with her sort of dog-like wistfulness, and said gently—

“‘Oh, no! Who could be indignant with them? They are so young and pretty. When people are like that, they don't need to care for these things—at least, I think not. It needs the empty heart like mine to feel all this beauty in things that are, after all, the lifeless creations of art.’ Then she added, but in such a low tone that I hardly caught the words, ‘*Their* gods are not of marble!’

“Miss Skeet and I, in fact, became quite confidential in these wanderings of ours in the galleries of Rome. I found her an interesting woman in her way, with a melancholy temperament deeply tinged with a kind of sad, sentimental enthusiasm. I was extremely sorry that Louisa took the strong dislike to her that she did.

“‘I can't understand,’ I used to

say to her, 'why you trample on that unfortunate woman so. I'm sure a quieter, humbler, more inoffensive being never existed.'

" 'She is n't inoffensive,' said my wife—'a sentimental woman of that age is repulsive, nothing more or less; and she *is* sentimental, you know she is. The way she gloats over all those naked statues makes me sick. I call it immodest.'

" 'My dear,' I observed in remonstrance, 'we connect no idea of immodesty with the nude works of the ancients; that is their special charm.'

" 'Well, I don't care,' said Louisa; 'I call it immodest to gloat over them.'

" 'But you go and see them yourself,' I argued, 'and you take the girls.'

" 'I'm a married woman,' said Louisa, stoutly, 'and the girls—well, the girls *will* be married. But for an old maid like that to go sighing and ogling over all those gods and creatures for no reason in the world

but because they 're handsome, it 's disgusting, and you know it.'

"'I don't know anything of the sort,' I said angrily; 'and I can't conceive what makes you wish to deprive this poor woman, who has been denied some of the highest privileges of life, of a pure intellectual enjoyment in the appreciation of art.'

"'Intellectual fiddlesticks!' was Louisa's only retort. 'If,' she continued, 'you 'd encourage her to do something sensible and suitable to her age and position, I would n't mind. If you would tell her to go and mix medicines in the ghetto for the Medical Mission, or work for the Waldensian bazaar that is to come off in February, I would have some patience with you. You'd be doing your duty as a clergyman then, at any rate.'

"I remarked that work of that kind would hardly suit a person of Miss Skeet's culture and poetical temperament. I spoke with a good deal of warmth.

“ ‘ I tell you what, Stephanus,’ my wife said, bringing down her hand with some force on a table in front of her—‘ you ’ll find yourself landed with that “ poetical temperament ” in a very uncomfortable position one of these days, I warn you ! That old goose will be falling in love with you—she will, you ’ll see ! ’

“ I observed sarcastically that I thought my position as a married man, and Miss Skeet’s age, were sufficient safeguards against this unpleasant emergency.

“ ‘ Safeguards ! ’ said Louisa, contemptuously. ‘ Nothing’s a safeguard against the ridiculous folly of a woman of that sort. The older that kind get, the sillier they get. I have n’t had two unmarried sisters older than myself for nothing ! ’

“ However, I had a juster and truer estimate of poor Miss Skeet’s character than my wife had, and I continued to befriend her whenever it was possible. I insisted she should occasionally accompany us on our expeditions, and that civility



and kindness should be shown her always—for I am more of a master in my own family than many people, I daresay, suppose. We had long outstayed the limits of our visit to Rome. The boys had gone back to school, and the spring was advancing with rapid strides. The peculiar charm of Rome was getting a stronger and stronger hold upon my mind, and I had no truer sympathiser with me in this feeling than Miss Skeet. The poor lady is connected in my mind with all my Roman experiences and impressions, for even when she did not come with us, we came across her perpetually, so beaten is the track of Roman sight-seeing. Sometimes it was in the clammy twilight of chill and mouldering old churches that her gaunt figure would loom upon us from behind some carved pulpit or grotesque and gilded altar. Sometimes we would find her seated on a fallen pillar in the Forum, or come upon her suddenly, grubbing up ferns in the palaces of the Cæsars, or hunt-

ing for broken bits of marble in the corners of the Coliseum. I never strolled out upon the Pincian Hill to watch the sunset but Miss Skeet was also there, forlornly leaning against the marble balustrade of the great central terrace, seeming strangely at variance with her surroundings—with the chattering, circling crowd, with the passionate, purple glow of the southern twilight, and the sweet, rhythmic waltz-music played by the band. Her faded eyes would watch the sun sink behind St. Peter's and behind the dark pine-trees of Monte Mario, and she would outstay the crowd and watch for the rise of the evening star, and then go home to the miserable, dingy *pension* in the heart of the great sordid town.

“Once, in especial, I remember a peculiarly significant meeting with Miss Skeet. It was in the Protestant cemetery—that spot which is perhaps dearer and more hallowed to us than any other on that classic ground. We were all there, but I came upon

Miss Skeet when I was alone, for which I was glad. She was in an excited and what my wife would have called a 'sentimental' mood. She had a little bunch of violets in her hand, and she held them out to me with a rapt expression on her hard-favoured face.

" 'These are from Shelley's grave,' she said—'Shelley's grave!'

"I went myself to Shelley's grave afterwards—that lowly, undecorated slab under the Aurelian wall—and, as if it had fallen of itself, there was a fresh, half-brown pink rose upon the dusty, uncared-for piece of marble. I was quite certain it had been dropped there by that poor, dear, foolish, romantic Miss Skeet.

"Our meetings with Miss Skeet being so frequent, you may easily imagine how quick I was to notice when they suddenly and unaccountably ceased. No more we found Miss Skeet in the churches, no more on the Pincio, no more among the ruins. I missed her for a week and

more, and then I went down to the *pension* to inquire for her. There I learnt that Miss Skeet was ill—down with fever, and all alone.

“I asked, of course, if it was possible to see her, and was told I might go upstairs and inquire. On the way up I met the English doctor, whom I knew slightly, coming down, as it happened, from seeing Miss Skeet herself. I asked him if the poor lady were seriously ill.

“‘I suppose,’ I said, ‘it is a threatening of the great enemy—Roman fever?’

“‘No,’ he replied shortly; ‘I don’t think it’s Roman fever. It might be anything in this stinking hole of a place.’

“The hotel or *pension*, or whatever it was, was certainly in an unsavoury locality. Every sort of unpleasant odour, from faint suggestions of drains, to the rank smell of cabbage stewing for dinner, seemed to pervade the atmosphere of the steep and unclean little stair. Miss Skeet inhabited a back-room on the fourth

and highest storey, and into this, upon knocking, I was admitted.

“In the restlessness of a fever-fit, the lonely invalid had been pacing up and down the narrow limits of her dingy Roman attic. I declare the pathetic eagerness of her welcome brought the water to my eyes, accustomed though I had been all my life to sad and pathetic things in the lives of others.

“‘Why,’ I said reproachfully, ‘did you not send for me when you felt yourself getting ill, Miss Skeet?’

“‘Oh,’ she said gently, ‘I could n’t think of troubling you. But it’s so good of you to have come of your own accord, and I’m so glad to see you, if it’s only to thank you for all your kindness. I have been thinking about it so much—night and day since I’ve been ill.’

“‘You have exaggerated it,’ I said, as lightly as I could; and then I told her how much I had missed her for a week past. On this occasion I did not stay long, as I was afraid of tiring her, and I went,

promising to return on the morrow. Poor Miss Skeet ! I remember vividly how long, after parting from her, the nervous clutch of her gaunt, burning hand seemed to remain in mine !

“ When I called next day it was to hear that she had become alarmingly ill. I could not see her, and the proprietors of the *pension* were, I could see, inclined to make themselves very disagreeable, after the manner of their kind when illness is in question. I went at once to consult the doctor, and before evening we had established a nurse in Miss Skeet’s room—a capable but grim-looking nun from one of the religious nursing orders of the city. After that my mind was more at ease, but I had a sad feeling about Miss Skeet—perhaps I had been infected with some of her own sadness. I remember as I walked home that evening how ominous seemed to me the sultry beauty of the great southern city under the fiery red of the sunset sky.

“ After this I called, of course,

every day, sometimes twice or thrice, and it came to be an arrangement that I should sit with the invalid during an hour or two when the nurse rested. In the afternoon the fever (which, as I now knew from the doctor, was developing into typhoid) would leave her for a little while, during which time, though weak, she was always collected and inclined to talk. Enveloped in a faded pink wrapper, she would sit up in bed—a gaunt figure supported by pillows; her hollow eyes would fix themselves upon my face, and she would talk and talk, with an energy and strangeness with which the incipient fever in her veins had no doubt something to do. The noise and rattle of the street far below would come to us muffled by distance, and across the tumbled roofs and thousand crooked chimneys of the adjacent houses we could see the glowing sky. The light of the Roman afternoon became a sombre twilight in this dingy and cheerless sick-room, but at the *Ave Maria* the sound of bells

from a hundred towers was as sweet and solemn there as elsewhere—perhaps sweeter and more solemn because the silence was so sad and the surroundings so forlorn and unlovely. I have, as a clergyman, listened to many strange confidences and heard many strange and sad confessions, but never, I think, have the secrets of a more melancholy personality been poured out to me than those which I listened to, with bent head and deep but silent sympathy, in Miss Skeet's sick-chamber.

“She used to tell me of the strange and feverish dreams which haunted the half-sleep of her long, restless nights. Very often I used to bring her violets—the streets were full of the sellers of those flowers at that time, and their laden baskets made the air sweet—and she used to keep them in a cup at her bedside. .

“‘They are so sweet,’ she said, ‘and such a colour! Did you ever see such shades of purple? The Sister always wants to take them away at night, but I won’t let her. They



comfort me when I can't sleep, and the scent of them goes through my dreams. Last night I dreamt—what do you think I dreamt of? I think it was because the violets smelt so sweet, they suggested beautiful things to me—I dreamt of the Antinous!’

“Her faded eyes looked dreamy as she spoke, and her voice was soft and low.

“‘And yet I did n't seem to be dreaming,’ she went on, ‘it was so real. He came and stood over there—the beautiful creature—just as he stands in marble in that bas-relief at the Villa Albani—you know, the one you took me to see. “His head was bound with pansies over-blown”—you remember that line in Shelley?—and the beautiful flowers he had in his hand seemed to be just dropping from his languid grasp. He seemed to offer them to me, and I longed to have them. But when I stretched out my hands to take them, he snatched them away, and that lovely, dreamy smile that he has broke into a bitter laugh, and he

vanished away. Oh ! ' said poor Miss Skeet, ' it was so typical of all my life ! '

" She paused for a minute, and then went on, searching my face, as it were, for a glance of sympathy—or at any rate patience.

" ' I 'm sure, ' she said wistfully, ' you think it very silly of me to dream and talk about such things—now, don't you ? And indeed, what has an ugly old woman like me (and an old maid, too ! ) got to do with things which express so much beauty and passion ? But you can't think how that dream remains with me—the type of so much that I have endured and felt. All my life long, I have been wanting beautiful things—I mean the beautiful things of life and experience ; all my life long, I have been stretching out my hands to get them—and always they have been withheld. It always seems natural to other people, I suppose, that this should be so, for I was always ugly, and awkward, and silent, and cold, but *I* never got used to it—never ! '

"I could only shake my head in sympathetic silence.

"‘Ah,’ said Miss Skeet, smiling at me now with a kind, dreamy smile, ‘*you* don’t know what I mean. How should a man like you ever be able to understand the life of a woman like me? You have loved and been loved; you have seen your children grow up round you; you have enjoyed every one of the most blessed and hallowed experiences of life. You have been rich in all these things—how can you ever understand my poverty? Why,’ and here Miss Skeet seemed to be speaking more to herself than to me, ‘I never even had a lover!’

"For a few minutes she seemed lost in a melancholy reverie; then she went on:

"‘When we were rich—long ago, I mean, before my father lost all his money—we used to live near London in a beautiful place by the river. The house had lovely gardens and lawns sloping down to the water, and I used to spend a great deal of

my time, in summer, reading and dreaming under the trees. All that neighbourhood is a great place for holiday-makers and for—for sweet-hearts, you know ; I think half London used to come and make love on that bit of the river ! I daresay they were n't very romantic or refined, those people ; but I used to watch them enviously—the lovers, I mean. Their boats used to go by, on the strong, smooth current of the river, and my eyes followed them longingly as they went—away under the branches of the trees which overhung the water—down the far, dreaming reaches of the river, till they were lost to sight. Oh—my heart and my fancy followed them—instead of remaining within myself cold and dead. Nobody ever took *me* on the river, except the gardener ! You know, I used to have sympathy even with the kind of people that everybody else laughed at, or were even rather disgusted with—the sort of sweethearts one sees walking in public places with their arms round

each others' waists, and who are n't a bit ashamed to be caught kissing. Others *might* laugh—I could n't. Vulgar as these people were, they had something *I* should never possess. Part of the divine mystery was theirs which would always be sealed to me.'

"It seemed to give her such a relief to talk, that I could not stop her, though it pained me exquisitely to listen. I felt as a person does who desecrates some secret place, who treads where he is not meant to tread, for I more than half-suspected that her mind was wandering on the verge of delirium. But she was much exhausted now, and talked no more, and just at this moment, a timely diversion was created by the re-entrance of the nurse. It was late in the afternoon, and one of Rome's most flaming sunsets was filling the poor room with an unnatural splendour of light. The grim nun advanced to the window and closed the venetians, and the poor invalid remonstrated in vain.

“‘I like the light,’ she pleaded. ‘Perhaps I shall never see another sunset. Why do you shut it out from me?’

“‘It is too much for you—too strong,’ replied the nurse, impassively.

“Miss Skeet held out her thin hand to me in farewell, and smiled.

“‘It is like all the other beautiful things,’ she said. ‘I must say once again what I have trained myself to say all my life : *The best . . . but I can never have it, and beautiful . . . but not for me !*’

“That was the last conversation of any length that I had with Miss Skeet.

“After this she grew worse rapidly, and the fever raged for two or three days without any interval. On the fourth day, as I arrived at the *pension* to make my usual inquiries, I met the doctor as he was leaving.

“‘It can’t last much longer, now,’ he said; ‘she will be quite unconscious presently, and after that she will never come to. I suppose you

are going up? I believe she wants to see you.'

"I went up. I saw a great change in the poor woman. She was lying back among her pillows, much emaciated and in great exhaustion. The film of the last lethargy was gathering over her eyes; but as they rested upon me, their gaze seemed to concentrate and clearness to come back to them for a moment. I took her hand and held it, and spoke to her. 'I'm glad,' she whispered, 'I'm glad . . . I'm going to die in Rome. . . . It's the one touch of romance . . . my life has been so cold . . . I shall lie in the cemetery—near Shelley, perhaps—under the cypresses—under the violets. You'll see to that, won't you?'

"I promised faithfully that I would see to it.

"'I think there's enough,' she said presently—'enough to bury me . . . there, in that desk.'

"She made me bring the desk, open it, and count over her little

hoard of earnings—all that she had in the world—for the annuity on which she lived died with her. There was not enough, nor nearly enough, to pay for the expenses of her illness, or the exorbitant charges of the hotel, consequent upon her death, not to speak of the purchase of her last resting-place. But I hope I may be forgiven the untruths with which I laid her anxieties to rest. I said there would be more than enough—and so there should, though it might not all come out of that poor shabby little desk.

“‘You’ve been so kind,’ she murmured; ‘I know you won’t forget . . . to see where I lie . . . in that beautiful place. It will atone for so much . . . for so much!’

“Those were the last words she said to me; for though she continued to murmur gently, it was to herself, and indistinctly. Once, bending over her, I seemed to catch words spoken to some listener, unseen but deeply beloved.



“‘*Dear,*’ I heard her say—and I cannot describe the passion, the longing in her faint voice—‘*Dear, you don’t know how purple the Roman violets are!*’

“After that came the silence which would be for ever. The evening bells were ringing from every tower and church, and the sound of them filled the air with a clamour that seemed dreadful and unseemly. But she did not hear them: she was deaf to all these sounds, and before the darkness fell, she was dead.

“I did for poor Miss Skeet what I had promised to do. I saw her laid in the Protestant cemetery. It was a little thing, and I knew it could not hurt her now, but it went to my heart like a knife, that the spot where her grave had to be made was very different to what she had imagined it would be. Nobody is buried now under the dim and beautiful shade of those cypresses that have made the cemetery famous: no body can lie now near where Shelley

lies, under the ancient wall of the city. All the graves there are old graves, and all the headstones are moss-grown. The modern dead must be content with a modern resting-place—out in the glare of the sun, where the young plantations of bay and eucalyptus die, nearly every year, scorched up by the heat, and have to be replaced by others more meagre than themselves. Poor Miss Skeet ! not even in this could the craving of her fantastic soul be satisfied. As in life, so in death—she was denied. I ordered violets to be planted on her grave, though I knew they would die in the glare and heat ; and then, having done all that I could, I went away.

“ I took my way through the old and beautiful part of the cemetery, where the violets covered all the graves like a purple pall, and the morbid gloom of the cypresses was starred by the waxen bloom of camelias just fully blown, and as I went I pondered on the problem of Miss Skeet’s existence. But pondering

brought no light upon it then, nor have my many after-thoughts on the same subject brought me to any satisfactory conclusion. The problem of such a life remains a problem to me, though perhaps I should be ashamed to acknowledge it.

“ You ask what Louisa said to the sequel of my conduct in regard to Miss Skeet—my purchase of her grave and so on. Well, to be truthful, I did not take her into my confidence at the time. Unfortunately, before we left Rome she found out a good deal from the doctor, and I confess there was a little unpleasantness between us on the subject. But that wore off in time. However, as you have just seen, Louisa is not fond of hearing about poor Miss Skeet to this day.”

C.

**AN INDIGENT GENTLE-  
WOMAN**



## AN INDIGENT GENTLEWOMAN.

### I.

A SELECTED few of the Ladies' Committee of the Institution for the Relief of Indigent Gentlewomen were sitting upon the case of Miss Horatia Lee.

One member of committee had already complimented the society upon its good works, and with masterly disregard of detail had alluded to the "hundreds of needy sisters whose lives were brightened and whose homes (?) were cheered by the unwearied exertions of the society," etc., etc.

There was a pause, filled in by

Mrs. Searle saying, with her enthusiastic little smile and a rustle of her stiff silk mantle, "Yes, there are so many little ways of supplementing a small income—so many really *pleasant* little ways."

"Just what will fill up a vacant half-hour or so, occupations one can hardly term work," said another member.

Then Miss Garnett, whose delight it was, when on committee, to brush aside with no light hand the euphuisms of her fellow committee women, rose to say :

"Miss Horatia Lee, I believe, is the case in hand to-day, ladies. She has been on our books for some time now, and except some white sewing given to her now and then by a country member, I find that we have done nothing for her." Miss Garnett swept the euphuistic committee triumphantly with her eye as she made this statement, and proceeded in the face of some feeble dissent. "Her case is an extremely needy one, and in spite of the many agree-

able little ways of supplementing incomes which Mrs. Searle alludes to, there seems nothing for us to do for this lady. I would like to receive some suggestions on the subject."

Of course, like all committees, when really brought to the point, this committee had very little to say for itself.

"Needlework," suggested the country member, who seemed one-ideal.

"Her eyesight is faulty now," said Miss Garnett, laconically. She began to enjoy the situation, and loved to watch the futility of her impractical sisters.

"Why, there's Art!" exclaimed Mrs. Searle, radiant, as if light from a higher sphere had broken upon her. "There are such innumerable departments of Art!"

"Miss Lee is entirely inartistic," said Miss Garnett. She began tracing a pattern on the paper before her, with a faint smile at the corners of her mouth.



“Wood-carving? Brass-beating? Iron-work? Oh, there are so many branches,” pursued the irrepressible Mrs. Searle.

“I thought we were already overstocked with work of this kind?”

“Most truly we are,” groaned the lady in charge of work, conjuring up sad visions of a veritable fortress of brass trays, flanked by solid bastions of copper-work and towers of filigree iron, which adorned her office.

“I don’t see where the difficulty lies,” said the stout lady in the corner, who prided herself upon her common sense. “The thing to be done is just to find her some easy, thoroughly remunerative work, and set her to it at once.”

Several ladies said “Yes, that’s just it,” and no one seemed to see any weak point in the argument till Miss Garnett said, “If you will say *what* the easy, thoroughly remunerative work is to be, Mrs. Smith, you will find where the difficulty lies.”

There was a rustle of papers, a few coughs, the sound of chairs edged

uneasily away from the table, and then they were all back at the original starting-point once again.

"This is dreadful," whispered Mrs. Seymor-Greene to her next neighbour. "I am sure I would rather pay the poor creature out of my own pocket, and be done with it. Can't you suggest something, Lucy?"

Mrs. Greene and Lady Davenant were the youngest ladies upon the committee, and wearied in well-doing in an incredibly short time. Lady Davenant was a slangy little person, blessed with "such happy little ways," so she laid her hand on her friend's arm, saying, "Hold on, my dear," in an aside, and then, addressing the committee—"Do you think Miss Lee could decorate a dinner-table now, Miss Garnett? Is she a person of any taste?"

"She is not artistic, Lady Davenant, as I said before, but I daresay she might manage that. I shall make inquiries."

"Could she keep my window-boxes?" queried Mrs. Greene.

“ And oh ! there are graves—what could be more delightful than keeping graves ? ” cried Mrs. Searle.

There was a suppressed smile on the faces of some of the ladies, but Miss Garnett took up the suggestions seriously.

“ Well, here are three suggestions—table-decoration, window-gardening, and the keeping of graves. If any ladies here can either give employment of this kind themselves or get some one of their friends to do so, it would be a great matter.”

“ I’ll engage Miss Lee to do my table on the 16th,” said Lady Davenant. “ I’ll risk it—it might make an opening for her if she does it well.”

“ That is very kind of you, Lady Davenant. Shall I put down your name for the 16th, then ? ”

“ Yes, do—and, let me see—yes, she might just do my window-boxes, too. Is it every week they need to be done ? and can you tell me about the remuneration business ? ”

“ I shall, Lady Davenant ; but,

ladies, it would need a great many such engagements to give Miss Lee a sufficiency."

"Well, let her take my window-boxes, also," said Mrs. Greene, wearied to death of the discussion and listening to the impatient champ-ing of her horses on the pavement below.

"Thank you, Mrs. Greene," and Miss Garnett made another note.

"Then there is my little suggestion about the graves," said Mrs. Searle, airily, settling the tulle strings at her throat with a fussy little movement, and mentally running over the graves of her connection.

"Most of us have the graves of our families properly attended to already," remarked Mrs. Smith, who was always at daggers drawn with this lady of many suggestions.

Miss Garnett hastened to say that there were possibly "many little matters of tasteful decoration which a lady was specially qualified for"—and at this a lady in black raised her handkerchief to her eyes, and poor

little Mrs. St. Clair gave quite an audible sob. She lost her two children six months ago when there was so much diphtheria in town, and every one had forgotten it in this talk on graves.

There was a moment of painful silence, and then Miss Garnett said "that perhaps this was a subject which should not be discussed in public, but that if any lady knew of such employment for Miss Lee, she, Miss Garnett, would be glad to communicate with her on the subject."

There was a dropping fire of remarks, a few final words from the chairwoman, and the meeting broke up. Mrs. Searle hastened off to an afternoon reception, Mrs. Smith turned on her homeward way marvelling at the want of sense displayed by other people, and Mrs. Seymor-Greene drove off in her victoria, laughing and talking to Lady Davenant, who sat beside her.

Mrs. St. Clair, poor soul, went to the cemetery and stood beside the grave of her children and wept. It

was a garishly bright spring day, and the wreaths she had sent only the day before were all withered up. After standing there for a short time, she went home and wrote to Miss Garnett a sad little note—on ridiculously black edged note-paper, considering, as the stationers say, “the nature of the bereavement,” hoping that Miss Lee would undertake the charge of the children’s grave. “I should like it to be kept always as fresh and lovely as their memory is to me,” she wrote, and then folded up the note with sighs and tears, and hoped that Miss Lee was a person with a tender heart.

This was not the only grave visited after the meeting. Mrs. Greene and Lady Davenant drove off through the sunny streets. The awnings were up over the windows, and the flower-shops were gay with tulips and early roses. The first smart dresses of the season were coming out bravely, in spite of a wind that told of winter not long past.

“If you’ll just let me out at the

flower-shop at the corner—Bald's—you 'll have helped me amazingly," said Lady Davenant. "I have some people dining with us to-night, and I'm distraught to think of anything new for my table."

"What a pity Miss Lee is n't forthcoming!" and they both laughed.

"Poor soul! and, by the way, were n't you amused with Mrs. Searle and her graves—'what could be so delightful as keeping graves!' What a perfectly killing creature she is!"

"Is n't she. Here we are at Bald's—if you really must leave me."

"*Absolutely* necessary, my dear—so sorry to leave you. Thanks so much for taking me so far—ta-ta."

The vivacious, jet-bonneted little lady disappeared under the striped awning, and the footman awaited his orders.

"To the Kenton Hill Cemetery," said Mrs. Greene, drawing her cloak around her with a little shiver.

Visiting the grave of her first husband was the most disagreeable duty of Mrs. Greene's life. It reminded

her painfully of the undeniable truism that none of us carry a charm with us against death. At first the idea that her handsome husband was dead—horribly dead—had pressed in upon Blanche Benedict's mind almost unendurably.

Not from the fact that the object of her love was gone from her, for she had never been in love with him, but just from the unavoidable emphasis which his absence gave to this unpleasant fact in life. After living with a man for ten years, his sudden quitting of the stage cannot be slurred over. Mrs. Benedict became very melancholy, and her friends said that poor Blanche was feeling her husband's death far more than they would ever have supposed she would. They urged her, with fine solicitude, to go abroad and get "a change of ideas."

"I should hate it," said Blanche. "I should feel so unprotected and dreadful by myself."

"It is true," Lady Davenant had remarked to a friend, "no paid at-



tendant could be expected to fetch and carry for her in the way poor Benedict did for the ten years of his bondage ; but then a woman with five thousand a year need never feel so lonely as all that."

So, yielding to the pressure from without, Blanche went abroad for a winter.

" And, my dear," said one of the two friends again discussing her after Blanche's return in spring, " it was like a miracle ! "

The acuter of the two was ready with her answer : " I see nothing like a miracle about it—it's just some other man ! "

And so it proved to be. Not many months had passed before rumour was busy with the name of Mr. Seymor-Greene. His friends smiled indulgently and said " she was a handsome woman, though, for their part, widows were n't in their line—but then there was the five thou., always a consideration." Whilst Blanche Benedict's friends shook their heads sympathetically,

and said " poor dear Blanche was so lonely they did n't wonder ; but one thing—they did hope that her money had nothing to do with it."

" Seymour-Greene was young and eminently presentable, if not quite so handsome as poor George," the widow had soliloquised, "and it would be a comfort to be married to a man who was n't a dozen years older than oneself"—George Benedict had been forty-five at his death, though he hardly looked it—"and she must have some one to take care of her."

Where Blanche Benedict had got her ideas of the dangerous outer world from is difficult to imagine, for all her life she had been guarded and protected in an almost unnecessary manner. It was one of her greatest horrors in life to be alone, to be uncared for, and to do anything for herself.

" I don't think women are meant *ever* to do anything for themselves," she would say. "We are meant to have mothers or lovers or husbands

to stand between us and the world always."

Acting on this principle, she, with admirable good sense, married Mr. Seymor-Greene of Elmhurst, and decided to bury the memory of the late George Benedict. She had been married for more than a year now, and had very nearly succeeded in her attempt, when this random shot of Mrs. Searle's brought the recollection of her late husband's grave to her mind.

"I know I left instructions and money for it, but I believe I ought to go and see it," she said.

The carriage rolled along, and stopped at the great frowning gates of the cemetery. A funeral was coming up, which she objected to mightily, but being in for the inevitably dreary, Blanche determined to go through with it.

"I'm afraid I can't find the place myself," she thought, looking out over the wide green desolation, threaded with painfully trim paths and dotted here and there with, for

the most part, mournful-looking figures. She stopped at the porter's lodge and requested his help to find the grave of Mr. George Benedict.

"Benedict, madam?" He turned up his book quickly, glancing down the crowded pages—"Benedict—in the autumn of 1880? Yes, madam, I'll take you to the spot." He assumed an air of suitable gloom and preceded her up the path, turning from right to left through the bewildering mazes of the place with what seemed to Blanche a superhuman instinct. He paused before the grave. "This is the spot," he enunciated very solemnly, having the trick of speech, while all the time he was searching back in his memory for some special feature of the funeral whereby to discover the lady's relationship to the deceased. But memory played him false—out of the hundreds of funerals he had witnessed, why should he remember this one?

"Shall I wait, madam?" he said.

"No, thank you; I can find my

way back. Here you are," said Blanche, dropping a coin into his hands, and turning away.

"She's the air of a widow as has married again," reflected the porter ; he had gained an uncanny insight in these matters.

Blanche stood beside the grave and took it all in. The handsome proportions of the marble cross—the turf below it, green and smooth—the shadow cast across it by a cypress near at hand. In all things a most unimpeachable monument, bearing *money* on the face of it. "It's *quite* well kept," she said, with a sigh of relief, "quite well ; the turf is beautifully green." It would have been a relief then to turn away, and go back to the land of the living, but Blanche, though not troubled by too fine feelings, had almost a sense of incivility to the dead in leaving the grave so soon. She shivered and looked round her. "Poor George," she said, "he was always good to me ; I wish I had brought some flowers." Then she turned and

walked away down the trim walk, which the shadows of the cypresses striped every here and there with black. Taking the wrong turning she came out into a poorer part of the cemetery, where the graves were marked by pitiful little offerings of wax flowers or memorial verses under glass shades, and where the grass was rough in comparison with the spot she had left. Her eye fell on the old pathetic formulas—"In undying memory," "In loving remembrance," and a vague feeling of irritation was stirred in her by their insistency.

"I'm sure there is no such thing as an undying memory," she said. "And a great pity it would be if there were," she added.

Then quickening her walk through the dreary place of death, she came out with relief on to the broad gravelled road leading to the gates ; settled herself with a sigh in the carriage ; and gathered her skirts in under the rug with a comfortable sense of their rich mundane texture.

She glanced down, too, at her dainty patent-leather shoes, and thought how well they fitted. But it was necessary to give one more sop to Cerberus. "Poor George! I'll tell Miss Lee to see that there are fresh flowers laid on it every week—surely that will do." It was a pleasure to reflect what a bill the florist would run up, it soothed her conscience. "And then Miss Lee will benefit also." It was an excellent plan; she began to forget the cemetery, and when the carriage swept out into the more fashionable quarters there were new objects of interest at every turn, culminating in Hyacinth Forbes out riding again with old Hart Isham. "Well! to think that I refused him when I was eighteen," she thought. "It's remarkable what girls will put up with nowadays," and she congratulated herself mentally on the eminently presentable young Seymor-Greene.

## II.

**T**HE story of Horatia Lee was just what one may read any day in the reports of any institution for the relief of indigent gentlewomen—a story hideously common, and unrelieved by a rag of beauty.

Horatia began life auspiciously, and had a youth of wealth and pleasure; but when her father Mr. Lee became bankrupt, his unpopularity overshadowed his daughter, and she disappeared from the fashionable world with meteoric suddenness. It was vaguely questioned “what these poor Lees were going to do,” but no one was really exercised in the matter, and Horatia was left to sink or swim in the troubled waters



of poverty. What she really did was to retire with her father to a tiny house in one of the unknown neighbourhoods. Horatia was twenty-four then, and very handsome ; but at this time, and in the slow years that followed, she went through a sort of patent process for the destruction of youth and beauty. Mr. Lee lost his memory, and became gradually paralysed, and the income, which was barely sufficient to support two persons in good health, had now to provide luxuries for the invalid. Horatia had to scrimp herself in every imaginable way to procure these luxuries. She was so young and courageous, however, that it took some time for the struggle to tell against her—six full years ; then her health broke down, and she began to think it impossible to go on in this way any longer. She procured some daily teaching, which lessened the money troubles, but told on her health still further. In the face of this, however, Horatia went on bravely, never flagging

much or seeming to lose heart—a marvel to those few friends who had stuck to her in her poverty. But at last the spring of her being seemed to break suddenly, and it was impossible to adjust the delicate mechanism. Her circumstances were apparently much the same; she was thirty now instead of twenty-four, and therefore, said her friends, more able to bear up under things—they failed to understand it. This was the outside verdict, but there was something further in it.

I think that Hope had departed, and with that bright guest went Youth, and Beauty too. All the years of struggle and sadness had failed to make Horatia old, till one morning she saw in the newspaper that her old lover—"in whom she trusted"—had married some one else. Then she consciously gave up the effort to live, and became old. The man she loved had been her lover in the old prosperous days—he was very young then, and not in a position to marry; but there had been very tender passages

between them when he left her to go to India, and through all these dreary years Horatia had cheered her heart with thoughts of him. He wrote to her often at first, then the letters became scarcer and scarcer, then stopped completely—still Horatia never questioned his good faith. “Silence, the slow poison which is commonly used by those who mean to murder love,” had been powerless to harm her ; the blow fell on her with as great unexpectedness as it would have fallen six years before. Of course life went on exactly as usual after this, but for Horatia it was all changed, and every day she felt the strain heavier.

Most of us are impatient of chastisement, and cry out under the rod very quickly ; a fortnight will suffice amply ; six months of distress makes a topic that lasts a lifetime. But for Horatia there were still years of privation in store—years of unutterable sadness and struggle, spent in tending a life that was not worth calling life any longer.

woman who went in to that long trial young, came out old and worn, and, as I say, Hope had departed.

For some time before her father's death Horatia had been on the list of applicants for work from the Indigent Gentlewomen's Relief Institution, and in the intervals of nursing had nearly sewed her eyes out over the white seam provided for her by a member of the committee. But when all was over and the long, long strain lifted, her health broke down completely, and she obtained admission to a "Home of Rest" in connection with the Institution. She had just laid down such a heavy burden that, at first, rest was all she thought of ; but when she had recovered a little, the problem of existence faced her more cruelly than ever. She was now left entirely destitute, and her health was far too feeble for daily teaching or for taking any situation. She applied once more to the Ladies' Committee stating the urgency of her case, and awaited

the results. They came in a letter from Miss Garnett :

“ The Committee have considered your case most seriously, and are most anxious to give you all the aid that lies in their power to give ; but the number of applicants for pensions this year is so great, that I fear it will not be in our power to settle any definite sum upon you at present. I hope, however, that you may be able to find some work, and as a beginning several ladies on the Committee have asked me to find out whether you can undertake table-decoration, window-box keeping, and the charge of graves. As these are all light employments, I fancy they may suit you while you are still in poor health, and as I have spoken to a great many members of our society I hope that you will get enough of this sort of work to make you comparatively comfortable for the present. I enclose notes from the ladies who wish to see you at once, and hope you will be able to

make satisfactory arrangements with them," etc.

Miss Garnett enclosed a note from Mrs. St. Clair and another from Mrs. Seymor-Greene, inquiring whether Miss Lee was willing to undertake the charge of a grave in the Kenton Hill Cemetery, and requesting her to call the next morning.

Horatia wrote a very humble letter to Miss Garnett :

"I am willing to do *anything*. I only feel that to struggle in the pursuit of work is impossible for me while my health is so bad. I thank the Ladies of the Committee very much for their kindness, and hope that I may be able to give satisfaction in the work which they offer me."

She signed the letter, but noticed, with the sensitiveness of poverty, that she had still the trick of finishing off with a dashing signature—a signature as of much cheque-signing and importance. She tore up the letter and wrote another, signing it with the most suitably small Horatia Lee that

her pen would form. Then she wrote some more humble missives to her future patronesses, stating the hours at which she would call to receive their orders. This done, Horatia lay back in her chair and, folding her hands in her lap, longed that Death had released her from this weariness which was called Life. "Why should I work to keep myself alive? I have nothing on earth to live for." Tears gathered under her closed eyelids and flowed slowly down her cheeks, and the matron, passing through the rooms on a brisk survey, expressed it as her opinion to the doctor that "That Miss Lee was most hysterical."

### III.

**M**RS. Seymor-Greene generally interviewed servants in her back parlour, so Horatia Lee was ushered into that chamber when she came to speak to the lady of the house on the subject of table-decoration, window-boxes, and grave-keeping. She waited nervously for Mrs. Greene, being still unaccustomed to interviews of this kind. Standing there in the morning sunlight, she was the ruin of what had been a handsome woman, but so thin—so thin! The skin stretched over her large stern features like parchment; you might fancy you saw the nerves working under it. Her once blue eyes had faded down to an inexpressive watery grey with long night-



watchings, tears, and white sewing ; but the black circles under them gave a startling emphasis to their dimness—these were not eyes that had always been dim. Her dress was very shabby. Mrs. Greene, when she came, was very kind—a little condescending, but, yes, quite kind. She begged Horatia to take a seat and settled herself in an arm-chair with her back to the light. The sun shone full on Horatia's face, bringing out every wrinkle on its haggard surface. Mrs. Greene began at once :

“ Miss Garnett tells me that you are willing to undertake table-decoration, Miss Lee. Have you any experience in this kind of work ? ”

“ Not as work, madam ; it is some time since I have done anything of the kind. I used to do it in my own home, when, things were different with me from what they are now.”

“ Ah—yes. I understand—most sad,” murmured Mrs. Greene. “ Then perhaps you will undertake my table for the 14th ? And if I find that I like your decorative system, I might

engage you for the 25th also. I have dinners on both those evenings."

"You are very kind. I should be very pleased."

"Then," proceeded Mrs. Greene, "I shall expect you to take all trouble off my hands. My florist is Bald, in New Street; just order everything from him, making sure that he sends in good time. Then about the grave I wished you to keep," she pursued, with an imperceptible lowering of her voice and a very perceptible hurrying over the disagreeable ground. "It is the grave of my late husband, Mr. George Benedict, in the Kenton Hill Cemetery——"

But here Horatia leant forward, covering her eyes with her hand, and uttered a sharp little sound between a scream and a groan.

"Miss Lee! Are you ill? What is the matter?" said Mrs. Greene, rising in sudden alarm. ("Is the woman crazy? She has a wild look! Shall I ring for the servants?" she thought.)

"It is nothing, Mrs. Greene—

nothing at all—only neuralgia—it comes in distressing throbs. I beg your pardon for interrupting you.” She sat up and looked across at Mrs. Greene quite steadily.

“Most distressing—well, as I was saying, Mr. Benedict’s grave is in the Kenton Hill Cemetery, and all I wish is that you will kindly see that fresh flowers are laid on every week. I have so many social duties I am sometimes afraid it may be neglected. Get the flowers from Bald’s also, and see that they are handsome ; grudge no expense, but also be sure that they don’t send any vulgar-looking wreaths—always white flowers. And as to remuneration, Miss Lee, I will send it to you quarterly—£5 a year, I think, is the sum generally given. Of course the table decorations are separately paid for.—What a chilly morning, in spite of the sunshine ! ”

Mrs. Greene, having got all her business over in one sentence, rose at her last words as a sign of dismissal.

"I am much obliged to you," said Horatia, moving to the door, though she hardly saw where to go : she was blind with tears and overcome by a sudden faintness.

"Good morning, Miss Lee. Then I shall trust you for the 14th," said Mrs. Greene after her ; and then she found herself in the hall and out once again in the blessed streets.

"Was this Fortune's last and most cruel blow?" she thought. "Why could a poor battered creature like her not have been spared this?" That she should live to be offered money for decorating George Benedict's grave by the woman who had supplanted her !—a woman who must have held so cheaply what had been all the world to her that now she must pay a stranger even to keep flowers on his grave ! But when she thought of it, Horatia's cheeks burned. No ; she might starve, but she would never take money for that. At first she determined to write and tell Mrs. Greene that it was impossible for her to undertake

the charge of the grave—the thought of owing anything to this woman was so galling to her ; but that evening, when she sat and thought it all over, she came to other conclusions. Would it not be a bitter pleasure to care for George Benedict's grave? Was it to be desolate that her pride might not suffer—for who would care for it as she would? It came into her heart to do this thing as a labour of love, and to refuse to take money for it. “I need never explain,” she thought; “only refuse the money when it is sent to me.” This entirely Quixotic plan, considering her impecunious and dependent position, comforted Horatia.

Then there came over her a terrible desire to see George Benedict once again. Coming home that afternoon she had passed a man in the street who had reminded her of him in some indefinable way. A careless fashion in which he had turned his head as he came along, or something in the set of his shoulders, had sent a tingle through

and through her. Now, like an awakened thirst, she was possessed with the longing to see him again. Fifteen deadening years hung between them like a veil, through whose rents she caught fleeting, maddening glimpses of his face. She was haunted by echoes of his voice. Standing at the window of the "Home of Rest," Horatia looked out over the town and noticed the glorifying, unearthly effect of the evening sunlight striking against the smoke. The town was so unchanged : she could remember evenings like this when she was a girl, and the sunshine and smoke met just as they were doing to-night. She remembered, with a sudden intolerable distinctness, how coming in late from a ride with George Benedict on just such an evening, she had kept him waiting to help her down while she exclaimed at the beauty of that bright mist. Her vivid remembrance of the incident recalled his face to her for a moment. The door opened, and she turned with a start, almost expecting to see him standing

beside her. But it was an old blind lady with groping mittened hands who stood in the doorway, saying—

“Is there any one here? I ventured across from the dining-room, but I am so afraid of knocking down anything.”

“I am here, Mrs. Dale,” said Horatia, and led the old lady to a chair.

“Thank you, thank you, my dear ; you are most kind. Perhaps I might trouble you to find me my knitting ; I don’t like to waste any time.” The knitting was found, and Mrs. Dale prattled on amiably, while Horatia began to pace restlessly up and down the room, answering her in monosyllables.

“To see him—to see him—to see him—and he is dead—dead and forgotten.” Then she remembered the grave, and acting on a sudden impulse, resolved to visit it that night. Perhaps by seeing it, and by fixing her thoughts upon him, she might even dream of him with a distinctness that would be comforting.

It was far past the hour generally selected by the inmates of the home for walking out but, ignoring this fact, Horatia set out for the cemetery. Like Mrs. Greene, she too had to be led to the grave, and the porter drawing his own conclusions from the haggard face, concluded, "This 'll be the widow ; maybe she won't be long followin' him." Horatia had no *douceur* to give, and indeed seemed to forget his presence from the first moment that her eye lighted on the grave. He turned away silently, and left her standing alone in the gathering dusk, returning a step or two to remind her, "Gates shut at 8.30, ma'am," and retiring over the gravel with a step disciplined into consciousness.

Horatia read and re-read the date of George Benedict's death incredulously. Was it possible that he had only been dead for two years ?—and already his wife had married again. In her quick recognition of the indifference that lay behind this fact, Horatia forgot and forgave all the



injury that had been done her. If he was forgotten by the woman who should have loved him most, at least he was remembered by her. She came nearer being happy as she stood there than she had been for years. On her way home through the darkening streets Horatia lived her youth over again, recalling without a trace of bitterness all the sweet words and looks that she had buried away in anger ten long years before. "I shall dream of him, I know—so clearly that it will be like heaven," she thought, as she mounted the stairs of the "Home of Rest." But the dreams that visited her pillow that night were only of Miss Clifton, the matron, whose remonstrating voice sounded in her ears the last thing before going to bed, telling her it was "quite against the rules for ladies to be out so late." Cupid perhaps flies past the doors of Rest Homes for Indigent Gentlewomen.

## IV.

AT the end of May it became necessary for Horatia to leave the "Home of Rest" and find other quarters. Being possessed at this time of exactly £3 10s. in the world, it became rather a difficult question where she was to go and what she was to do?

Miss Clifton and some of the inmates of the Home expressed great interest in her affairs, and it would doubtless have been better for Horatia if she could have taken them more into her confidence. But this she found it quite impossible to do. Though she had been battered by almost every adverse blow of Fortune, Horatia's pride remained the same. Her character was built

upon a fine pride—an intense independence. She tried several times to tell Miss Clifton that she had exactly £3 10s. in the world, and that should work fail her she must starve, but the words refused to be uttered, and she found herself instead saying only pleasant little nothings about the “Home of Rest,” and the benefit she had received from her sojourn in it. Miss Clifton finally came to the conclusion that Miss Lee must have some small means of her own to speak so calmly, and Horatia added to the impression by saying, when questioned as to her future, “I am taking a small house,” which certainly sounded very comfortable.

Miss Garnett was perhaps the only person in the world who really knew how poor she was ; it was to her that Horatia had appealed so urgently for help at the time of her father’s death, giving of course an honest statement of her resources. But this had been in a time of extremity, and now all her old

reserved pride returned. She wrote to Miss Garnett vaguely—"She found, on her affairs being wound up, that enough remained to rent a small house for a time (?) She hoped Miss Garnett would kindly help her to obtain work still, and she begged to tender her sincere thanks to the Society for their exertions on her behalf."

Miss Garnett was quite relieved by the tone of the note, and decided that she had perhaps taken an exaggerated view of Horatia's case.

Horatia had indeed taken a house—selected for its unknown neighbourhood, its smallness, and its rent of £3 a quarter. Here she decided she might live—or starve—unknown and unnoticed, in her tiny two-roomed house. It was a curious little place. Built on a bit of no-man's-land which stretched between miles of workmen's houses that surrounded it on every side, it always had the air of a deserted house. It must have been older than the new houses round it, for two lilac bushes

grew in the patch of ground before the door, and they are slow-growing trees. On every side the eye could light on nothing that was fair or sweet. Builders' rubbish littered the ground, and wherever a clear space occurred the earth was black and trodden. A little fence surrounded the house, but in spite of this the garden was quite as bare as the ground outside the railing. The former occupant had presumed upon the supposedly suburban nature of the spot to keep hens, and the little space before the door was scraped bare by them, ornamented with feathers and straws, and under the lilac trees the interesting fowls had scraped the earth into hollows, which did not add to the general tidiness.

This, then, was the house Beautiful to which Horatia came, having lavishly paid out her last three guineas to her landlord for the doubtful privilege of possessing it.

She moved all her few remaining pieces of furniture into it, and fixing

her thoughts hopefully on the promises of work she had obtained, entered upon this stage of her pilgrimage. She determined that if, at the end of the first quarter, she had quite failed to support herself, she would sell her furniture, and once more, probably for the last time, cast herself upon the tender mercies of the Society for the Relief of Indigent Gentlewomen.

It was such a forlornly foolish speculation that it hardly deserved success. But, such are the unaccountable freaks of Fate, from the day that Horatia entered into possession of the house, Fortune began to smile upon her once more. June and July were busy months in the fashionable world, and being recommended from one of her patronesses to the other, Horatia soon found herself amply supplied with occupation in table decoration alone. She began to take an interest in her work apart from mere money-making, and would stand before the flower-shop windows trying to evolve

new schemes of colour. At the end of June she bought a dress, and after long abstinence from new clothes, felt the inextinguishable feminine interest in herself give a flicker of life again. July was a very hot month, and the long distances she had to walk were trying to a person in such delicate health, but at the beginning of August Horatia counted over seven golden guineas in her purse with almost childish glee. These were her earnings for decorations alone in the last two months, and she had still to receive Mrs. St. Clair's payment for the keeping of her children's grave, and Mrs. Seymor-Greene's would probably come at the end of the month. "And I can send it back!" thought Horatia, "and I will. I will never touch a penny of it!" She locked away her money in a table drawer.

Every one who was unhappy enough to spend the August of 188—in the country, remembers the cold rains and blustering winds of that

most inclement season. And for those who remained in town the case was little better. It was like winter come again suddenly after the heat of June and July. Poor Horatia shivered and suffered inexpressibly. The little house was so cold, and, besides, work was very slack, and there was nothing to be added to her earnings. The fashionable world for whom she had worked were all scattered, and her occupation was limited now to a window-box or two which had still to be kept in order, and to the graves—which don't go out of town in the autumn months! This dull time brought forebodings with it, of possible worse times coming, and Horatia, in the daily strain of idleness, felt herself falling back a little into her gloomy views of life. She caught cold too, one wet night when she walked back from the cemetery in rather indifferent boots, and her cough threatened to be obstinate. Every time she went out it got worse, and as she had no one to send for her necessary messages it was una-

.



voidable that she should expose herself. One melancholy wet afternoon, Horatia, with a pang of regret, found that she must break upon her seven sovereigns to buy food. She was coughing so badly that she thought she must allow herself some more nourishing diet than she had been subsisting on for some time. She determined to buy a good stock of food and stay in the house for a week, if possible, to cure her cough. It was very wet and windy, and with difficulty she struggled through her marketing—struggling not only against the wind and rain, but against a feeling of deepening depression. “You’re a perfect fool,” she addressed herself sternly. “No one can expect to go straight on succeeding all the time. See how well you have got on already, and when people come back to town it will be as good as ever again; and you have enough to live on till then—plenty—even if you don’t use up all your seven guineas.” But the dread of running short of money prompted Horatia to plan out

a letter to Miss Garnett which, while telling of her successes, would also ask for some other employment till her patronesses returned to town. She was so occupied in thoughts of this, that she stood still on the doorstep of her house to think out a half-composed sentence. As she stood there, a faint noise inside the house startled her, and she listened again. Something was moving inside. Horatia was not, generally speaking, nervous, or she would never have come to live alone, but it occurred to her that some one must have entered the house in her absence. She stepped to the window and looked in—everything was as usual. So she unlocked the door and went in, standing for a moment on the threshold to listen again. The little bedroom entering off the kitchen had a window to the back, and if any one was in the house they must have entered by it. The door between the rooms was shut, and Horatia, without giving herself time to think, crossed to it and turned the handle. The door was locked.

She ran out at the door again and round the house. The window round the house was open, but, looking in, there was no one in the room; the intruder had escaped at the sound of her key in the lock. Of course Horatia's thoughts ran to her six guineas. She was trembling all over with fear when she returned to the kitchen and looked round. Then she saw in a moment that the table drawer had been wrenched open and the money was gone.

It is a hard thing to lose one's capital when it is sixty thousand—but perhaps even harder when it is only six pounds. Such a thin plank has been removed, yet through it what deep waters of poverty may come in. Poor Horatia had no words or tears. She sank down upon the floor and covered her face with her hands. 'The fire went out gradually, the rain drifted in across the floor making a little pool at the threshold, but Horatia never moved. Oh the terrible cold of the world!—it was so absolutely unnoticing of this her agony.

Hours passed ; the dusk fell and the dark ; Horatia never stirred. At last a step came up the path. "Any one in?" asked the policeman, glancing in. "Should n't leave yer door open this fashion at night." There was no sound or movement, and the man stepped in, striking a light to inspect this unprotected house with. Then he bent down and shook Horatia rather roughly. "Come, get up," he said ; "leavin' yer 'ouse open at this hour, it's a shame to you." He tried to raise her to her feet as he spoke. Then a very low voice said, "I cannot move --something has happened—I am very ill."

## V.

**I**T was after this that the "Home of Rest" once more opened its doors, and this for the last time, to admit Horatia Lee. "Poor creature—just a dead weight on us now for the rest of her life," said Miss Clifton; but she was kindly too, in her bustling way, and nursed Horatia back to some measure of health with commendable zeal and skill. She made a passive, gentle invalid, and after a few weeks recovered sufficiently to be lifted every day to an arm-chair beside the open window, where the fresh air and sunshine came in. There she sat, day after day, week after week, looking out across the garden with a quiet unregarding stare: not that the faculties were gone, for, if spoken to, Horatia

could answer perfectly well—only she seemed wrapped up in thoughts that were worlds away from her surroundings. Miss Clifton came daily, the doctor weekly, to see her, receiving always the same quiet smiling replies. “I feel comfortable, thank you,” “I feel much the same,” “I feel rather better.” There was never any change.

After one of these visits, Miss Clifton sighed and shook her head to the doctor.

“I am afraid it is a chronic case, now. We can’t look for much improvement.”

The physician stroked his chin meditatively.

“Miss Lee needs rousing, I feel,” he said. “She sits there alone all day. Has she no friends?”

“No—no friends that I know of.”

“This is the visitors’ day, is n’t it? I wonder if that would cheer her up. Send some of your kind ladies in to see her—cheerful society sometimes does wonders, and let me know the result.

Miss Clifton considered the proposal a good one, and mentally ran over the visiting ladies on her list.

"Visitors' day" was, indeed, quite an institution at the "Home of Rest," and those of its inmates who had conquered any lurking dislike to being patronised, really enjoyed their visitors. These were of several sorts. One, or perhaps two, visited that sad port for humanity's wreckage with hearts that ached and questioned at what they saw. Many came because they had nothing special to do, and had, withal, a vague desire to be "kind"; which they blunderingly lived up to. Lastly, a few came because good works happen to be fashionable just now. Among these was Mrs. Seymor-Greene — "one of our brightest visitors," as Miss Clifton designated her. "Just the person for Miss Lee."

The sunshine was pouring into the ward that afternoon as, ushered by the matron, Mrs. Seymor-Greene came tripping up the waxed floor in

her smartest gown, holding a bunch of autumn flowers in her hand, and smiling the fixed smile of charity. Horatia sat as usual by the window, gazing out across the yellowing trees, her hands spread limply across her knees. She turned slowly at the sound of footsteps, and her dull eyes rested with one long look upon her visitor.

"She is quite helpless," Miss Clifton was explaining in a rapid undertone—"cannot move from her chair; but she will be much cheered up by a visit, Mrs. Greene, and those sweet flowers."

"Yes, I think flowers have their own sweet message, always," said Mrs. Greene, who was now almost at the window where sat the recipient of the sweet message, deaf to the sweetest sounds of earth, blind to its fairest sights. But a sudden change passed over Horatia's face. A wave of recognition—a spasm of feeling. With both hands she grasped the arms of her chair and swung herself on to her feet. There she stood,



drawn up to her full height, before her astonished visitors. Mrs. Seymour-Greene started back, and Miss Clifton moved forward with an exclamation. Then Horatia, raising her stiff right arm, pointed at Mrs. Seymour-Greene.

“Go,” she called out ; “go—out of my sight for evermore.”

The blank walls of the ward rang back the terrible vibrating tones of her voice—a voice where the passion and tears of a lifetime were heard. She rocked for a moment where she stood, then fell back into her chair. Miss Clifton was beside her at once, laying her back against the pillows, and motioning Mrs. Seymour-Greene to leave the room. “I’ll be with you as soon as I can,” she added ; “please send the nurse here.”

But Horatia seemed to need no more nursing than usual. She gave no further sign of excitement, only shuddered and motioned Miss Clifton to close the window.

Mrs. Seymour-Greene, on her part was quite scared and upset. She

sat in Miss Clifton's room and drank a glass of water, speculating upon Horatia's unaccountable conduct.

"I had an idea long ago when she came to interview me about grave-keeping that she was slightly deranged : I wonder if that can be the case," she said, sipping the water as she spoke.

"Oh, no ; I can assure you we have never seen the slightest symptoms of any mental unsteadiness. I cannot understand it at all, and the more so that you were so exceedingly kind to her," said Miss Clifton.

"Oh, well, not exceedingly kind. I gave the poor creature some employment—for which, by the way, I was meaning to pay her to-day. I suppose money is of very little use to her now, but still she really earned this." Mrs. Greene laid a cheque on the table, and proceeded : "Spend it on any little luxury that you think she would be the better for, you know."

"You are really too kind, Mrs. Seymor-Greene. The doctor was

just saying to-day that it was a pity we could not give Miss Lee some carriage exercise, so I can take her out some nice drives with this."

"Do, and I'll be glad to let you have some more when that's done. I don't mind the poor creature taking a dislike to me, I'm sure. I was only startled. Thank you, I feel *quite* well again—no, thanks, no more water—nothing—I must really be off. These poor dear ladies here are *so* interesting they fly away with a whole morning, and there is so much to be done when one first comes home," etc., etc., etc. Mrs. Seymor-Greene talked herself downstairs and into her carriage, followed by Miss Clifton's profuse thanks.

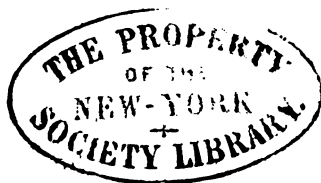
When Horatia went out for her drive, she asked to go to the Kenton Hill Cemetery—not a very cheerful spot, as Miss Clifton told her. She looked long at one grave there, smiled, and said it "was not well kept now—the flowers were withered."

Horatia still sits at the window of the Home of Rest. Few visitors are admitted to see her, however—they are considered too exciting; but she drives out occasionally, “through the kindness of a friend”—always to the same spot.

When last I saw her she seemed weaker, and her hair was white as snow at forty years of age.

I think that the steps of the Great Comforter are at last drawing near.

THE END





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